

REPORT TO GC - OCTOBER 2003

The past few weeks at Westminster have been totally gripping as the Conservatives have been doing what they do best - plotting, undermining and backstabbing! I discovered that I am an old softie, as I felt sorry for IDS. However, he really didn't cut the mustard and he was incapable of thinking quickly on his feet. By contrast, the heir apparent, Michael Howard, is quite an accomplished performer at the Dispatch Box, but beyond the Westminster village he does tend to frighten people. Aaaargh! It will be very difficult for him to shake off Ann Widdicombe's 1997 description as "having something of the night" about him. Aaaargh!

I overheard a conversation at a Tory table in the tearoom on Thursday morning - the morning after the deed was done - in which they were all congratulating themselves on electing a new Leader aged 62. He does come with a history and it will be very difficult indeed for the Conservatives to re-package him in an appealing way.

The Conservative drama has obscured almost everything else at Westminster as this Session draws to a close. Bills are currently stacking up in the House of Lords and we now know that the Hunting Bill will fall. We all expected this to happen, as the Commons rejected the Alun Michael compromise (a system of registration) and voted for a complete ban. This was too much for the Lords to swallow. The key question now is whether the Hunting Bill will be reintroduced in the next Session and forced through using the Parliament Act. The Queen's Speech is on Wednesday 26 November and will include some of the most widely trailed Bills in political memory. Tuition fees, foundation hospitals and the abolition of the remaining hereditary element of the House of Lords, possibly ID cards.

Elsewhere, the conflict in Iraq drags on with the endless killing of American soldiers. If our soldiers were dying in a similar fashion, we would be facing huge political problems. As it is, we have the Hutton Report due around the turn of the year and we wait to see what conclusions he draws. The Chancellor has set aside £3 billion for the cost of war. With £700 million spent up to the point military operations began. I was told last week that "it is too early to provide total cost of the military campaign."

Locally, the big news was the arrival in Pendle of the Prince of Wales. I shook the royal hand before replying respectfully to his question about why I was not at Westminster! By all accounts, the visit was a great success, although his helicopter had problems in getting him down to Manchester to visit the Victoria Baths there. I found it quite amazing that he can compartmentalise things so that the royal revelations from Paul Burrell and others do not furrow the royal brow. Following the visit, there is clearly an expectation that huge amounts of public money are going to cascade into Whitefield and some kind of way forward must be plotted by the three principal agencies, the Borough Council, English Heritage and Elevate.

I had an interesting meeting with Elevate's Chief Executive, Max Steinberg, who comes across as a very experienced and energetic operator. I shall be visiting some renovated properties in Manchester at his invitation to see what can be done. I will also be having another meeting at Westminster with him and with the other East Lancashire MPs in November, as he puts together the bid for cash from Central Government. I think we are talking about £80 million in the first instance, but for this to have any meaning it has to be translated into what this sum can buy in terms of area renewal.

The other huge issue confronting us is the bid for capital finance to build new secondary schools in Burnley and in the western part of Pendle. It is proposed that two new schools will be built at Walton and Edge End, with Mansfield going. There has been a woeful lack of consultation with the impression being given that the Pendle part of the bid was hastily tacked on as an afterthought. However, Jack Bennett and the education people at County Hall clearly believe they have been given a nod and a wink by the DfES and are very optimistic. The worst case scenario would be a partially successful bid with the Pendle part losing out. The County has now formally submitted its bid to the Department and we are told that an announcement will be made around the turn of the year. Having spoken to the relevant Heads, I have now written to Charles Clarke to say that I am backing the bid in its entirety. If the money comes through - and we are talking about £150 million - it will provide the visible signs of change that I have been talking about for years.

On the planning side, the news of the month has, I suppose, been the application by Peel Investments to develop their site on the Barrowford side of the Padiham bypass for housing and business. I know that the Party in Barrowford is campaigning vigorously against this.

Concern about NHS dentistry is a constant here and the Government is trying to turn things round, but it does take time. We are boosting the number of dental students which has gone up since Labour came to office from 668 to 696. Still too modest! The Government is, however, currently undertaking a review of the dental workforce including the number of undergraduate places in dental schools and the review will be published by the end of the year. Calls to NHS Direct by people in the North West looking for a dentist are way above other regions.

Next year will be a busy year for us with the local and European Elections being held on the same day 10 June, followed by the expected Regional Assembly referendums in October. As you know, the Government has resisted calls for a referendum on the EU constitution, arguing that the accession of the 10 candidate countries next year has required a tidying up of the treaties, but that nothing fundamental has changed. The Government, for example, has resisted any moves to transfer responsibility in all or part to Europe of key areas such as foreign and defence policy, social security and pensions, criminal justice system and so on. However, the Conservatives may try and turn the Euro elections into a referendum on the EU constitution and/or the Euro. The Party in the North West is producing some excellent campaign literature to help us prepare for the campaign.

Since I last spoke to the GC the Government has decided to go for postal ballots in the Regional Assembly referendums. I have raised the issue with John Prescott of including maps with the ballot paper, as voters cannot be expected to carry about in their heads detailed maps of local government areas. There is also the question of whether the Party regionally or nationally takes a view on the shape of the new local government structure should the referendums be won. This could be very controversial. The draft recommendations from the Boundary Committee are expected in December. The final recommendations on options for restructuring 2 tier local governments in the regions will be published on the 25 May 2004. No dates have been decided for the referendums, but the Government, under the legislation, cannot order the referendums until July 2004.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
31.10.03.

September

Report to GC Friday 26 ~~October~~ 2003

We are in the run up to Conference and I can barely remember a time so fraught. We lost our first by election in 15 years at Brent East where a big Labour majority evaporated. Brent East was never going to be an easy contest and, despite huge resources ploughed in, we lost to the Lib Dems. I found it mildly ironic to be handing out official Labour leaflets plastered with photos of Ken Livingstone when he was expelled from the Party a few years ago and still hasn't been allowed back in.

Whitefield decision: Here in Pendle, I felt very angry indeed at John Prescott's decision to confirm the Inspector's recommendation in the Whitefield public inquiry. Despite the brave public face put on the decision by Pendle Council (that it would work with Elevate and English Heritage to plot a way forward) it must have come as a bitter blow to all those who put time and energy into the Whitefield proposals. There is a real danger that this decision will mean more delay and more blight. I am seeing the Chief Executive of Elevate in a few weeks to talk through the implications. I am certainly not prepared to wait years for things to happen.

The end of the line? We also saw a new report published which looked into the possible reopening of the Colne Skipton railway line. Commissioned by Lancashire and North Yorkshire councils it was much less definitive as early press reports in Pendle suggested. Yes, there are big problems in re-opening the line but these are not insuperable. The report also made it clear that a new road following the line of the old railway would extinguish any possibility of re-opening the line in the future. Common sense statement really!

Government policies continue to make a difference to millions of people who are least well off but progress, such as it is, barely gets reported as the aftermath of the Iraq war continues to dominate everything. For example, the minimum wage next month goes up from £4.20 to £4.50 (hardly a King's ransom) but it benefits up to 1.6 million people - two thirds of them women.

The Hutton Inquiry has now concluded its evidence taking sessions and it has offered a very rare glimpse into the internal workings of the British Government. I still find it astonishing the confidential memos to the Prime Minister have been posted on the internet for all the world to see. I believe there is now a very real danger that people will conclude there was no compelling reason to go to war. The Prime Minister said in his foreword to the September

1D cards - cabinet debate - + all
but the other policies? + + against

dossier that he believed this issue (weapons of mass destruction) to be a "current and serious threat to the UK national interest."

Weapons of Mass Destruction: No WMD have yet been found despite the work of the Iraq Survey Group who have been combing through the country looking for evidence. The infamous 45 minute claim referred to battlefield weapons, not strategic ones. If the majority of people believe we went to war on a false prospectus we will find it very difficult to recover. As it is, in the absence of WMD I believe many Muslims are shifting their political allegiance.

Superimpose on that background, the many other difficult issues coming up and it is plain as a pikestaff the Government is in for a difficult few months. The Prime Minister says he will listen to concerns but, if past practice is any guide, there will be no change in policy so the prospect emerges of bruising battles on the floor of the Commons. Foundation hospitals is a case in point. Never discussed in or agreed by the National Policy Forum, this policy dropped out of a clear blue sky. Top up fees is another issue where labour MPs are prepared to draw a line in the sand and say this far but no further.

to do it
fairly
to show
weakness

Teeny
bopped
in N210

A more democratic House of Lords? The Government has now made its position clear on the House of Lords. It will get rid of the hereditaries (good) but wants a wholly appointed second chamber. The least popular option by far when the matter was debated in the Commons. And then there is that old favourite, fox hunting. After years and years of endless prevarication, will the Parliament Act be invoked to outlaw, once and for all, hunting with dogs?

I have decided not to seek re-election to the Parliamentary Committee this November. My colleagues in the PLP have elected me to the six strong backbench delegation for the past two years but I feel I can make more of a difference outside.

very
difficult
to spend
and when
I see 1D
every week.

We will not win back support if Labour continues to be the vanguard party it has become, with controversial policies coming from a tiny number of people at the very centre. I believe we need some pretty basic structural changes to the way we make policy. For a start, it would be a good idea if we were allowed to vote on substantial policy issues (that were not in the manifesto) before they come onto the floor of the House of Commons! The wider Party also needs a bigger say. The National Policy Forum has become, in my view, a complete irrelevance.

Gordon Prentice MP

Friday 26 September 2003

heard Dole interview.
cancer statement + live
fund 1D stories.

- 4 part of film to done

REPORT TO G.C. AUGUST 2003

HUTTON INQUIRY

I am just back in Pendle after a short holiday in Ireland and the Hutton Inquiry still dominates everything - as it did before I left. The pundits say the Prime Minister gave an assured performance yesterday, but the two substantive issues on the whereabouts and existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction and, secondly, the 45 minutes issue, remain as obscure as ever. We must all hope that the answers to the WMD issue emerge as the situation will get progressively more difficult if soldiers continue to be shot dead on the streets of Basra and elsewhere.

For those of us obsessed by politics, the sight of confidential emails being posted on the net by Lord Hutton has been a revelation. We now know whose emails were copied to whom. We know who is in the loop and who is out. My jaw dropped in astonishment when I learned the Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, had sight of the September WMDs dossier a mere week before it was published. Staggeringly, not only did he suggest no changes, but he didn't comment on the document at all. This beggars belief. Lord Hutton will soon be calling back witnesses for cross examination so there is more of the story to run. Andrew Marr, the BBC political correspondent, has said that the decision making machinery of the Government - the internal wiring - has been exposed as never before and it does reinforce the argument that key decisions have been, and are, taken by a small number of people at the centre. To other matters...

HEALTH

I spent an interesting morning today with the Chairman and Chief Executive of the Burnley, Pendle & Rossendale Primary Care Trust. We ranged widely over a number of issues and I told them that more should be done to promote positive health stories in the local media. There are successes, but they are not always publicised. We need to make much of the new health centre which will be opening at Yarn Spinners Wharf in early 2005. I am told the building work will be finished by December next year and the new complex will be a state of the art affair, providing GPs with excellent facilities and patients with a wide range of services.

OPEN WIDE

The lack of NHS dentists does, however, throw a long shadow over popular perceptions of the NHS locally. I believe we really need to rattle the bars of the cage on this one and demand the extra resources we need to reverse the decline in NHS dentistry. In the local PCT area there are 73 dentists with an astonishing average 3,349 people per dentist. PCTs are to be given new powers to commission dental services or provide them directly and there is no explicit duty to do this under existing legislation. The PCT has appointed a couple of new salaried dentists, but much, much more is needed. The local PCT is also backing an amendment which is coming up on 8 September to allow for the fluoridation of the water supply. I am minded to support this, given that our children here have, I think, the worst dental health in England. The British Dental Association is supporting this, as are many health authorities across the country. I appreciate there are differing views and some see this as mass medication.

POST OFFICE

Elsewhere, other controversial issues remain unresolved. I have formally responded to the proposed closure of 4 post office branches in Colne, although I think we are in a very difficult position given that the postmasters concerned want to get out of the business. These closures are part of the so called Network Reinvention Programme which the Royal Mail says is integral to their three year renewal plan. They tell me over 400 urban branches have closed under the programme, with the surviving branches benefiting from increased business. They now want to review post offices on a Parliamentary Constituency basis and consultation will start here in Pendle in April/May 2004. The whole programme is supposed to be complete by the end of 2004.

The possibility of a postal strike looms and I am keeping my fingers crossed that the differences that exist between the CWU and the Royal Mail can be resolved, but the signs are not good. The Royal Mail's decision to transfer mail from rail to road incensed many.

BACK TO BUSINESS

Parliament returns the week after next and a new Parliamentary year will begin. We have the running controversies over top-up fees and foundation hospitals to contend with and other emerging issues such as ID cards. A consultation paper has just been published on new Citizenship Ceremonies, which stipulates that applicants for citizenship must have "a sufficient knowledge of life in the UK" and that more should be done to prepare people for citizenship through language training; education about life in the UK and celebrating the acquisition of citizenship.

The Audit Commission will soon be embarking on a review of Pendle Borough Council and they will be ascertaining whether its services are good, bad or indifferent. I have been asked to give my views! I shall also be meeting the new Chief Executive of the Housing Renewal organisation "Elevate" to discuss their plans and get an update on where we are.

REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

The Regional Government debate rolls forward although I still think it will be a very difficult job to win a referendum, given the hostility and indifference which this proposal generates. The front page of the Barnoldswick & Earby Times today is all about returning West Craven to Yorkshire! This issue is a burr under the saddle which is not going to go away. The real bone of contention will be the shape of the unitary authorities that will have to be formed if regional assemblies are set up. I am told that the Borough Council decided last night to support (a) Pendle as a unitary and (b) Pendle joined with Ribbles Valley as an alternative. The Boundary Committee has asked people to let them have their views by 8 September. I am told their draft recommendations will be published on 1 December with leaflets being delivered to households across the region, outlining the draft recommendations.

GORDON PRENTICE MP

29.8.03.

REPORT TO GC JULY 2003

This has been the most febrile July I can remember. Iraq still dominates the agenda and the death of Dr. Kelly has pitched the Government and the BBC into open warfare. As I write this today there is fevered speculation that Alistair Campbell might be about to resign. Former Ministers have called publicly for the Prime Minister to stand down and while there is no support whatsoever for this view in the PLP, it does add to a general feeling of destabilisation at the centre of the Government.

In this climate, the good things that the Government is doing are relegated to the inside pages. The statement on wind generation with £6 billion being spent on 3 offshore areas was a one day wonder with not even a Commons statement. The excellent proposals on the establishment of a Supreme Court and the abolition of the award of QC is long overdue. However, these proposals are eclipsed by the continuing row over the Second Chamber. The Government's official position is to have an entirely appointed Second Chamber and this cannot possibly represent the views of the majority of Labour Party members.

This disjunction between what the Government is doing and the views of the Party will return with a vengeance in the autumn when we return to the issue of foundation hospitals and university top up fees. It is still unclear to me as to what would happen to a foundation hospital that went from three stars to two stars. Presumably it would lose its foundation status.

CHEMISTS, POST OFFICES & DENTISTS

We have also had to grapple with the community pharmacies issue (and I have received lots of petitions with thousands of names) and we also have the very controversial proposals to close four post offices in Colne. A further temporary closure is proposed for Salterforth. And, to cap it all, more dental practices are going private.

A POSITIVE RECORD

In one sense, what is happening at the moment is only what is to be expected. We are in the mid-term of a second Labour Government and people want to see evidence of positive change. Good things are happening and we have to remind people otherwise they forget. For example, since 1997 we have seen a 23% fall in Pendle's unemployment and an 88% fall in long term unemployment. And these figures are from a relatively low base.

In 1997 unemployment as a proportion of the working age population has fallen from 2.8% to 2.3%. We have 3,428 families getting the Working Tax Credit and the new Pension Credit is to be introduced from 6 October this year. For the first time, pensioners aged 65 and over who have modest savings and income other than the state pension, can get extra money each week - up to £14.79 and £19.20 for couples. The winter fuel payment, which is appreciated by so many pensioners, will be increased by £100 this winter for households with a pensioner aged 80 or over. All in all, more than 16,000 pensioners in Pendle get the winter fuel allowance.

Education and Health are key areas of concern. And it is tragic that the controversy about who was responsible for the school funding mess has obscured the very real increase in resources going into education. Of course, there are areas where we need to do a lot more -

and I am thinking of the situation in FE - but most headteachers spoke warmly about the Government's education initiatives - until the funding crisis hit earlier this year.

NHS FUNDING

The NHS locally is receiving a huge injection of funds. In the 5 years from 2001-02, the Burnley, Pendle & Rossendale PCT (and its predecessor organisation East Lancashire HA) is receiving a **real terms** increase of 6.3%, 7%, 6.6%, 7.1% and 6.6%. £445,000 was spent on the modernisation of Accident & Emergency at Burnley General and over £1 million is being spent on cancer treatment equipment there. Burnley General is also expecting the delivery imminently of a new MRI scanner.

3.6% in some only paid in colleges.
New Health Centre in Nelson
Yanispinner Wheel in 2 years time

HOUSING RENEWAL

Elsewhere, money is going into the local area via the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and a multiplicity of other funding streams. Of course, housing is the big issue here in East Lancashire and in Pendle we rank fifth in the country in the terms of empty and abandoned properties. This is why the success of "Elevate" the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder is so important. £10 million has been allocated initially and we can expect to see the detailed work, the maps and the strategic plan published around January 2004. This will pave the way for sustained housing renewal work. Within the next fortnight we should have word from the Government on whether the Council can go ahead with the clearance work in the Nelson West Renewal Area. I have spoken to the Minister concerned, Keith Hill, and pressed the case and we keep our fingers crossed. As you know, there is a vocal lobby arguing for repair and renovation rather than the selective demolition which I believe is necessary.

Next year we have the European Elections and the possibility of a referendum of a regional assembly. My views on this are well known and the process will have to be very carefully managed if it is not to blow up in our faces. I believe the Government will ditch the commitment to a referendum next year if it is clear that it cannot be won. A parallel is the commitment to a referendum on changing the voting system which was quietly dropped, despite protestations from the Lib Dems.

BURPENDALE

A regional assembly would mean the re-configuration of local government into a single or unitary tier. As I speak, chief executives and councillors all over the North West are pouring over maps, looking at possible link-ups. Here, the possibility seems to be a county wide unitary, an East Lancashire unitary or two unitaries in East Lancashire with Pendle going in with Burnley and Rossendale - the so called Burpendale. How people here in Pendle will react to this is anyone's guess. I suspect they would need convincing.

Pauline, Jim and I went to a meeting on the Parliamentary Boundary Review over in Preston earlier this month. The Commission is recommending an increase in the number of Lancashire seats from 15 to 16 with no change to the Pendle constituency boundary, which remains coterminous with the local authority. The council will be supporting the Boundary Commission's recommendation, as will I.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
25.7.03

Ken - media -
ABC

Computer

Nelson, Colne, Burnley

*4000 responses
56% phone in
response
rip of Kelbrook!*

one 9
9

250,000

PROPOSED PARLIAMENTARY BOUNDARY CHANGES FOR LANCASHIRE

The Boundary Commission for England is proposing certain changes to Parliamentary Boundaries in Lancashire. They are recommending that the number of seats increases to 16 from the present 15 and their proposals are based on the electorates in 2000. The proposals would not take effect until after the next General Election.

The Commission's provisional recommendations mean no change whatsoever for Parliamentary Boundaries in East Lancashire. All the changes are concentrated in the western and central parts of the County. The Commission's proposals will make Blackpool North and Fleetwood a more marginal seat, as Fleetwood would come out of the new constituency. Colleagues in Blackpool are therefore putting the case for a 15 seat solution, rather than the 16 seats being recommended by the Boundary Commission. With the present 15 seats, the disparity in the electorates is too great, with Pendle on 63,347 and Blackburn on 73,010.

A 15 seat alternative would mean reducing the disparity between constituencies. It would involve Pendle absorbing the Ribble Valley wards of Reed and Simonstone.

I joined Jim and Pauline at a consensus meeting in Preston on 12 July where MPs and CLP officers from most of the constituencies were represented. Although there was no vote, I sensed the consensus was to back the 16 seat provisional recommendation of the Commission on the grounds that it delivers the best results for the Party across the County.

It is my understanding that Pendle Borough Council is likely to back the Boundary Commission proposals.

REPORT TO G.C. 27 JUNE 2003

A huge amount has happened since the last GC and the Government is under pressure on a number of fronts. Indeed, one poll gave the Conservatives a lead over Labour for the first time in years but I am sure this is just a blip.

TRAGEDY IN IRAQ

That said, there is continuing concern over the situation in Iraq and the murder earlier this week of the six British soldiers in the toilet block of a sun-baked police station in the middle of the Iraqi desert was truly horrifying. It made me think again about what we expect the military to do for us. The controversy is still raging over the so-called dodgy dossier and the 45 minute claim set out in the earlier September 2002 intelligence dossier. The extent to which these influenced MPs in the run up to the vote is a matter for debate, but I still believe the continuing priority is to find the elusive WMDs.

On two occasions this week we had Opposition Day debates given over to Higher Education funding or, more specifically, tuition and top-up fees. This is a very difficult issue for us and I simply cannot believe a Bill proposing top-up fees of up to £3,000 will get through the Commons in the new session. The Government has admitted that the average level of student debt is likely to rise from £12,000 to £21,000.

HUNTING

On Monday the Hunting Bill (yes! its still around) comes back to the floor of the House of Commons from Committee. The Bill bans deer hunting, hare hunting and hare coursing outright, but sets up a registration and licensing system for fox hunting. To hunt foxes with dogs in future would require a Hunt to satisfy a registrar that (a) there is a real pest control problem and (b) using dogs is significantly less cruel than any other means. This proposal has been ridiculed as "managerial" and what is now needed is a simple straight forward vote to include foxes in a total ban. An amendment, which I am supporting, will be called and voted on. However, we are now told that if this is carried it will produce internal inconsistencies in the Bill which will have to be re-committed to a Standing Committee! I still want a clear commitment to use the Parliament Act if the Lords block the Bill.

TAXING MATTERS

The week after next, on Tuesday 8 July, we have another problem Bill on Foundation Hospitals. Other issues have been bubbling away in the background. Peter Hain was left twisting in the wind, following his suggestion that there could be a debate on income tax. When I asked the Prime Minister on Wednesday if too many people were paying the top rate of income tax, he told me, bluntly, "no". The plain fact is that more people are being drawn into top rate tax and there is a case for lifting the threshold. There is also a very strong case for increasing the top rate for people who, by any standards, are very well off. This is not a return to punitive taxation but a recognition that our top rate of 40p is one of the lowest in the developed world. I say all this knowing tax is a sensitive issue.

Still on matters economic, we have had the Government's decision on the Euro which was so widely trailed it hardly raised any eyebrows at all. The two main documents and the 18 supporting ones are in my office and available for consultation!

~~- Nigel Baskett~~
- ~~John Purswell~~ } Silverman-
- ~~John McCook~~ } Lecture.

FUN & GAMES AT THE PALACE

On a lighter note, we have had a right Royal break-in at Windsor. When I spoke on this in the Commons I prefaced my remarks by saying that everyone was relieved nothing terrible had happened. But it did get me thinking about the cost of Royal protection - and these fancy dress dos - when football clubs and even agricultural shows have had to stump up for the cost of the extra police they feel they need. I was asked at the last GC whether tax had been paid on the gifts given by Prince Charles to his employees and sold on. My questions were blocked at the Table Office on the grounds that I was inquiring into the tax affairs of individuals. We take it on trust that the tax has been paid.

Gifts destroyed + salvaged by staff

Here in Pendle, I have been meeting Catholic School headteachers to talk about school funding problems and such like and last Friday, I spent a very enjoyable hour at the dentists - glugging wine and scoffing prawns. The practice in Scotland Road, here in Nelson had just received a BDA Good Practice Award and an Investors in People - a first for East Lancashire and possibly the UK. It was a good news story.

Tomorrow I shall be meeting people from the Trade Justice Movement who are concerned that the current terms of trade disadvantage poorer countries. I think the Government has a good record on this - we have extinguished the debt owed by about 40 heavily indebted countries, but we need to do a lot more to give them a fair deal. The decision yesterday on CAP reform should help remove some of the distortions in world markets and help improve the trading position of developing countries.

*- HIV Aids - cheap drugs etc
subsidy CAP reform;*

FILESTORES

The Filestore issue is coming to the boil now that the Government has made it clear it wants to transfer the responsibility for management and storage of sensitive records kept on people who are claiming, or have claimed, social security benefits. No in-house bid is being invited and the Government wants to get the private sector to take over by July next year. A huge filestore up in Clover Hill is affected. I raised the issue yesterday in the Commons and spoke to Andrew Smith on Wednesday evening and I have applied to the Speaker for an Adjournment Debate.

*about
60
DWP
Nelson*

BOUNDARY COMMISSION

Finally, the Boundary Committee for England has told us that the constituency boundary is proposed to remain unchanged. This is a huge relief, given that last time they wanted to bolt on three Ribble Valley wards to Pendle. Other constituencies do face changes and a meeting is being held in Blackburn tonight to formulate a Labour Party response.

*NEW
15-16
Wyke +
Preston N*

Perhaps more significantly, as a result of the Government's decision to press ahead next year with referendums on regional government in the North East, Yorkshire & Humberside and the North West, the Boundary Committee has been charged with reviewing each area and making recommendations for single tier local authorities. They have to set out two options and representations should go to them by 8 September.

100% Hardy

*3000
submissions
?*

GORDON PRENTICE MP
27.6.03

*Still very difficult to
win. Consequences of
losing a year before a
general election.*



REPORT TO G.C. MAY 2003

Parliament is now in recess but we will be back next week with some red hot political potatoes on our plate. The issue of the moment is, of course, whatever happened to those weapons of mass destruction. Although I voted against the war on Iraq, I know that many of my colleagues were persuaded to vote with the Government because they believed Saddam Hussein had some fearful WMDs and could unleash them in 45 minutes.

I am perfectly prepared to accept that the WMDs may have been destroyed, but we now have access to the scientists who purportedly worked on the WMD programmes. I find it astonishing that information relating to the development programme and/or the destruction of these WMDs is not forthcoming. Watch this space.

On a related point, we must all hope that the new Middle East roadmap will lead to a fair and just settlement for the Palestinians which will give Israel secure borders, co-existing peacefully with an independent and viable Palestinian state. We live in hope.

I know how difficult it is to resolve long standing enmities, having returned recently from two days in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia Herzegovina. The war ended in 1995 with the Dayton Accord and eight years on an international peace-keeping force is still needed to hold the ring.

EURO SPEAK

Back here, European matters start to dominate the political agenda (the local elections next year are to be rolled-up with the European Elections and held on the same day in June). We have an announcement on 9 June setting out the Government's decision on whether to recommend joining the Euro. There has been extensive press briefing and it is clear that the Chancellor will say the time is not right, but the indications are he will want to take steps to make it possible to recommend joining sooner rather than later. Indeed, there are suggestions in the press that the Prime Minister could allow this Parliament to run its full five years (until June 2006) to allow the Government to campaign for, hold and win a referendum on the Euro. Fat chance! I don't believe we could win a referendum in this Parliament. To do so, the ground would have to be prepared with a lengthy programme of public education so that people knew exactly what the implications of joining or staying out were. Public views may change rapidly if foreign investment and jobs start going to mainland Europe. I have also called for "parallel pricing" which would allow people to get used to thinking in Euros.

The second European issue concerns the so-called "EU constitution". A gathering of politicians from EU parliaments and various assorted worthies have been looking at how EU institutions might adapt to cope with the arrival of 10 new countries into membership in 2004. Without certain changes, the whole thing would seize up and go into gridlock with nothing being decided. I take the view that the proposals should be debated extensively in Parliament and I share the Government's position that there is no need for a referendum. The draft has to be approved by each member country and the UK has made its sticking points absolutely clear. For example, the UK is against majority voting on foreign affairs matters and insists that the veto should stay on all tax issues.

The UK wants to see greater co-operation in asylum and immigration matters. We all know that asylum has to be put to bed as an issue of contention well before the General Election. I have made my position clear at previous GCs.

MUST DO BETTER!

On domestic matters, the Government has hit a sticky patch. It is quite unbelievable that given the huge increase in education funding, we should now be facing a crisis where schools cannot balance their books. I visited West Craven High Technology College recently and was given a briefing by the Head who explained his shortfall was about £97,000 and that even with the concession allowing him to spend capital money for revenue purposes, the school would still be adrift by £60,000. The Government says it has a shared responsibility with LEAs for schools and it cannot be held solely to blame. Whatever the rights or wrongs, the whole episode has been a disaster. This at a time when the number of primary school teachers in the UK is at its highest level since 1980. The number of secondary school teachers was up 4,000 in 2001. By 2005-06, educational expenditure is planned to reach 5.6% of GDP - the highest level in the last 25 years.

Locally, five of our seven secondary school are putting in a joint bid for specialist school status. This comes at a time when the House of Commons Education & Skills Select Committee has published a report questioning whether the Government has based its secondary education policy "on secure foundations". The report says "schools which have achieved specialist school status can be exciting places with high levels of pupil attainment. The question we ask is whether this is due to the advantages extra funding brings, or the management process that schools have to take, or something inherent in being a specialist school."

Two other issues cloud the horizon. The more we learn about foundation trusts the less persuaded we are. The Government's proposals, I believe, are simply unworkable. The other very difficult issue for us concerns top-up fees. The Government has promised legislation in the Autumn, but I suspect there is no majority in Parliament for what is being proposed. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats and a big chunk of the PLP are against the proposals - as are, I guess, 99% of young people with aspirations to go on to higher education.

The Party's Regional Director, Kevin Lee, has written to me to say that the Parliamentary selection here in Pendle is about to begin. Now's your chance!

GORDON PRENTICE MP
30.5.03

REPORT TO G.C. 28 FEBRUARY 2003

IRAQ

Recent weeks at Westminster have been totally dominated by Iraq. On Wednesday, the Commons voted on a cross party amendment tabled by former Cabinet Minister, Chris Smith, which stated that the case for military action at this stage was unproven. I was one of 199 MPs (201 MPs if we include the Tellers) who supported this amendment. I went on to vote against the Government's substantive motion which stated that UN Resolution 1441 gave Saddam Hussein his "final opportunity" to co-operate. I take the view that the inspections are, in a faltering way, having an effect and while the inspectors are in there, nosing around, we should not set artificial deadlines. The policy of containment which has been applied since the end of the Gulf War, coupled with an aggressive inspections regime has, I believe, neutralised any threat.

I sat through six hours of debate without catching the Speaker's eye. This was hugely frustrating, but there were many MPs in the same boat - with speeches unspoken. The fact is the Government does not have the kind of public support it needs to take the country to war. And for all his legendary powers of persuasion, the Prime Minister has been unable to persuade the Parliamentary Labour Party (leaving aside the pay-roll vote) or the wider Labour Party that war is necessary at this time. We keep hearing from all quarters that Saddam Hussein is a bad man. That is taken as a given but there are dictators and despots all over the world. And we have not hitherto been in the business of "regime change" and nor have we taken "pre-emptive action" where a nation is not imminently threatening us.

I had it in my mind to refer to a speech made on the floor of the US Senate on 12 February by Senator Robert Byrd, the highly respected former Democratic leader in the Senate. The views of American politicians like him are rarely reported over here - but they should be. He called the Bush administration reckless and arrogant and said quite explicitly that pressure appeared to be having a good result on Iraq and that "this war is not necessary at this time". The danger is that events will spin out of control if President Bush believes that there is no possibility of getting a second UN resolution specifically authorising military force. Many countries on the Security Council including those with a veto (France, China and Russia) may feel that the inspections are having at least, some effect and should be given time to work. In the circumstances my fear is that the US will go it alone, under pressure from the Military who will tell Bush he cannot keep 200,000 US troops frying in the desert over the summer. The idea of Bush bringing back the troops from the Middle East with Saddam still in Baghdad defies belief. The question then is what Britain would do.

COMMUNITY COHESION

A war against Iraq, in these circumstances, could trigger disturbances in East Lancashire. This afternoon I was at a regular meeting with the police top brass to consider these "community cohesion" issues. It is certainly true that many in the Moslem community feel totally alienated by the Government's position on Iraq. Waiting in the wings is the BNP who are increasingly active in this area. In the last elections in Burnley they got 10,000 votes. A huge number.

Peter Pike and I will be meeting the Prime Minister this coming Wednesday to discuss some of these issues and to press for additional resources. While we have received considerable amount of cash through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and other funding streams, we need a lot more. I shall be meeting the Chairman, David Taylor, of Elevate, the new body that has been set up to co-ordinate and manage the Housing Market Renewal Initiative, something I have spoken about before. I have told the Prime Minister that we cannot expect to build a cohesive community (in the jargon) in East Lancashire with thousands of decaying, rotten, empty and abandoned properties in our midst. The scale of the problem is daunting. In April last year there were 2093 vacant and 4290 unfit dwellings in Pendle and 3446 and 9336 respectively in Burnley. And yet, despite this, we have to go through the endless rigmarole of Public Inquiries for the Whitefield Clearance Area.

The Census results were published a few weeks ago and the population of Pendle has increased quite substantially in the 10 years since the last census. Up from 85,111 to 89,248. There are boundary reviews in the offing here in the North West and in view of the population increase it is unlikely, this time, that we will be "invited" to take Read, Sabden & Simonstone in from Ribble Valley to boost the numbers here in Pendle.

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

While foreign affairs dominate, other issues still feature. Bubbling away as a potent issue for us is the whole question of asylum. Figures out today showed that the UK took 100,000 asylum seekers with their dependents last year. The Prime Minister has pledged to get the number of applications down by 50% by September but there is no doubt that asylum is an issue of increasing salience for many voters.

On more domestic matters, the Hunting Bill is currently in Committee but will be coming back to the floor of the House in the next month. We also have the continuing controversy over Higher Education funding. This was brought home to me on Wednesday when I had a party of students from Nelson & Colne College down at Westminster. They saw the Prime Minister at PMQs and stayed for the opening of the big debate on Iraq. They were certainly very interested in Iraq - didn't want a war - and they were also concerned about tuition fees and such like. Looking forward, we have the Budget in March although no date as yet. This also reminds me that there is no early date for the reform of the House of Lords! The Prime Minister's decision to call for a wholly appointed Second Chamber was a crucial intervention with none of the options before us getting a majority. That said, the 80% elected option only failed by three votes. But in the Commons one vote is enough to kick an issue into the long grass.

I am looking forward immensely to the Mayor's Ball next Friday and I shall be all toggled up in my DJ and bow tie as befits the occasion!

GORDON PRENTICE MP
28.2.03

REPORT TO G.C. 31 JANUARY 2003

TROUBLED TIMES

These are difficult times for us. Iraq dominates the headlines but there are other issues too that are concerning people. But the prospects of war and our involvement without the explicit authorization of the UN Security Council is generating huge disquiet. Over recent weeks I have received letters of resignation from the Party from a number of long standing members. It is my practice always to urge people to stay and make their views known from "inside the tent" so to speak, but this is always a difficult line to sell when people feel their views are not being listened to.

The Party is about to embark on a new round of consultation in the second wave of Partnership in Power. The covering letter I have tells me the five documents are genuine consultation papers. We should take the General Secretary at his word and get involved - and rattle the bars of the cage if decisions are taken where the views of the Party were never canvassed. Faith schools is a classic, but there are more recent examples such as foundation hospitals and national missile defence.

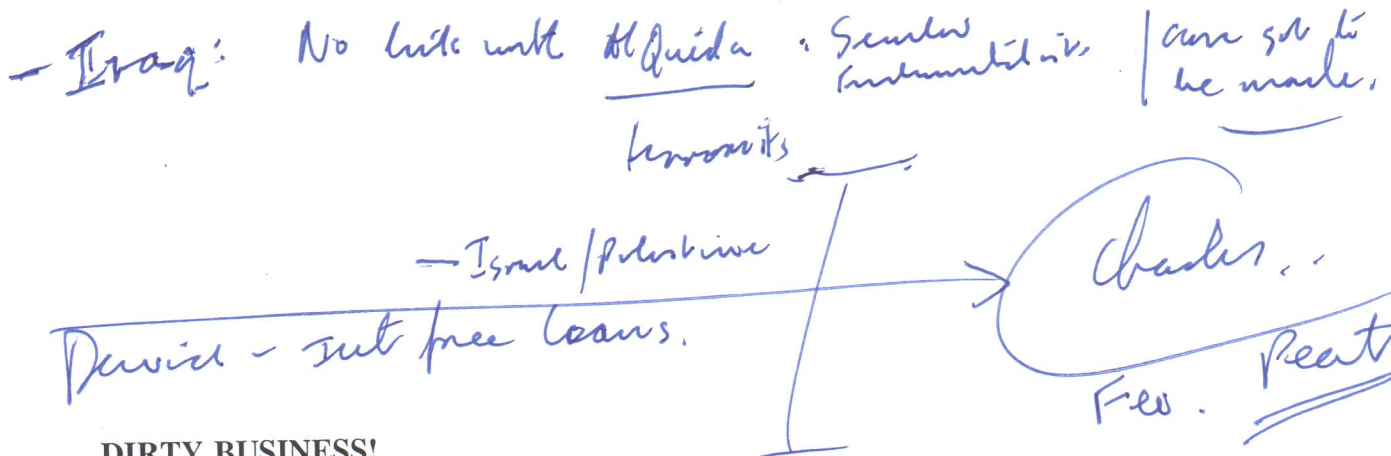
Rumbling away in the background is the fire fighters dispute and the threat of new legislation. The tabloids continue to poison public attitudes towards asylum seekers although most people recognise that the pressures on the system are immense. We have had a statement on top-up fees for universities and the prospect of significant student debt. And on Tuesday of next week we in the Commons will vote on Lords' reform with the Prime Minister telling us that he is now in favour of a wholly appointed Second Chamber. There is a whole range of secondary issues in the background such as post office cards and the implementation of the CSA reforms. These are indeed difficult times.

IRAQ

Iraq is the issue that counts. My own view is that the UK should not go to war against Iraq in the absence of a second resolution from the UN which, itself, would only be forthcoming if there were compelling evidence from the weapons inspectors that Saddam Hussein had amassed a stockpile or arsenal of nasty weapons of mass destruction or that Iraq was persistently refusing to answer the questions posed by Hans Blix, the Chief Weapons Inspector at the UN on Monday last. The UK should not go it alone with the USA which is intent on "regime change."

This week I have been in Strasbourg at a meeting of the Council of Europe as I am part of the UK Delegation. We had an emergency debate on Iraq yesterday and the overwhelming view of Parliamentarians from across Europe was to follow the UN route.

I shall be testing the Parliamentary Labour Party's opinion on Iraq by tabling a motion for debate on the 12 February. This is allowed for in our Standing Orders, but is rarely used. (in fact, I was the last one to use it when I tabled a motion urging the uprating of the national minimum wage a couple of years ago!).



DIRTY BUSINESS!

When I was in Strasbourg, I spoke in the debate on marine pollution which had been brought forward by the Spaniards, still reeling from the consequences of the sinking of the Prestige in November which went down off the north west coast of Spain at Galicia. I recalled the Sea Empress which went down at Milford Haven in 1996, spewing 75,000 tons of oil into the sea. The fine was £750,000. Totally inadequate. These environmental issues have a tremendous resonance amongst the public and especially young people and I believe we need to crack down really hard on these environmental crimes.

NEARER TO HOME

Here in Pendle, I shall be visiting the Nelson Filestore next Friday. As people will know, there is a proposal to review the organisation and number of these filestores and I am going down to speak to the staff who work there.

Last Friday, I attended a rather chilling briefing from the new Chief Constable of Lancashire on the subject of "community cohesion". It focused more on the possibilities for community disorder over coming months and the arrival of the BNP, who are preparing to dig in to what they regard as fertile territory, is very worrying. Every grievance will be magnified and exploited by them. I saw footage from the disturbances in Burnley in 2001 and these thought of a reoccurrence is too awful to contemplate. The police want to work closely with other agencies to minimise the possibility of this happening.

The new Chief Constable is certainly proving to be a new broom. He wants to make Lancashire simply the best police service in the UK and he is certainly being very open about his objectives and, indeed, about operational matters. I have been invited to go out tonight with the police on some kind of operation. Sounds a bit mysterious, but I am sure that I shall be safe in their hands!

In the coming week, or perhaps the week after, we shall be getting Prescott's statement on the money available under the Housing Market Renewal Initiative. As you know, we are one of nine pathfinder areas singled out for special help.

GORDON PRENTICE MP

31.1.03

Digital

Heaving acids.

R1 for the Prof. They thought they were getting them

REPORT TO G.C. NOVEMBER 2002

Lots of things are happening at Westminster, but the fire fighters strike dominates. The Prime Minister told the Commons on Monday that a 4% increase was on the table but anything above this would have to be negotiated on the basis of savings from changes in working practices. While the fire fighters 40% claim has not been withdrawn there has been much talk of something emerging around 16%. However, this can only happen if the FBU decides to participate in the independent Bains Review and I hope Andy Gilchrist and the FBU leadership will do this. As I said before, the work of a fire fighter has changed out of all recognition since 1977 - when the last review of working practices took place. This happened during the Silver Jubilee and we are now in the Golden! It is doubly unfortunate that the two strikes we have seen from the fire fighters have both occurred under Labour Governments.

Also on the emergency services, I had a very useful briefing today from Superintendent Stephen Hartley (Divisional number 2) and Inspector Paul Robinson who is in charge of policing in Nelson and Brierfield. Our discussion touched on the new National Policing Plan, unveiled last week, which brings together in one document the Government's policing objectives and priorities. Anti-social behaviour continues to be an issue, as ever, and we will be getting an Anti-Social Behaviour Green Paper out in January with further legislation next year. Drugs - especially heroin - but also crack cocaine continue to be a problem but I know that more resources are going into this area.

On Wednesday we had Gordon Brown's Pre-Budget Report which forecast that the Government would be borrowing in order to maintain the stability of the economy. There has been a world economic down-turn aggravated by 11 September and many major trading nations have gone into recession (meaning simply that the total amount of goods and services produced in one quarter is less than the previous). The Government's response to this economic slow down is neither to raise taxes nor cut spending on health, education and the rest but to borrow from the markets temporarily. The Chancellor has always said that borrowing is OK so long as things balance out over the five year economic cycle. Ever since we were elected in 1997 we have been paying off huge amounts of Government debt and the City barely blinked an eye at the £10-£20 billion implied in the Statement. This means that our spending plans for pensioners, working families and everyone else remain unchanged.

The other big issue, of course, is Iraq and on Monday the Commons was invited to support the UN Security Council Resolution 1441 which had been unanimously adopted by the 15 member Security Council, notably including Syria. The Liberal Democrats put down an amendment which secured the support of, I think, 35 Labour Members. The amendment called for a second vote at the UNSC before any military action was embarked on and also a vote by the Commons before any UK military action. These are indeed my sentiments and I thought long and hard about the issue but, at the end of the day, I voted against the amendment and with the Government after Jack Straw had told us that the Government was committed to a second UN resolution in the event of Iraqi non-compliance and that the UK would be minded to table one. The joker in the pack is, of course, George Bush and the objective is a disarmed Iraq and not so called "regime change".

Frank by Tony - reputation
fraud

We have also seen the publication of "Success for All" the Government's plans for implementing reforms in further education and training. I haven't gone through the document in great detail and I would welcome the comments of those colleagues working in the sector. Still on education, the possibility of top-up fees is causing great angst in the PLP and, for many colleagues, this is a Rubicon which will not be crossed. I am against top-up fees which would institutionalise a two-tier higher education system. For similar reasons, I am against another Government policy which has been sprung on the Party - Foundation Hospitals. We already have medical centres of excellence, the teaching hospitals, but to have another layer better resourced and financed than other hospitals is going in the wrong direction.

Aylmer Locally, I see that work continues on proposals for the new Health Centre at Yarn Spinners Wharf. I support this although there are some concerns about access and the impact on the town centre. However, I believe the thinking is to keep the site of the present Health Centre next to the Community Hospital in NHS use. Still on the theme of change and service improvement, I look forward to the announcement in January of the money coming to Pendle as part of the Government's new housing initiative which will target those areas of the country where the housing market has all but collapsed. I want to see big money coming here. We will also have a new Housing Bill giving local councils such as Pendle the right to licence landlords. I have spoken about this many times in the past and I am relieved it is now going to happen.

Last week we gave a second reading to the Regional Assemblies (Preparation) Bill which paves the way for referendums. The Government is proposing a very weak a watered down tier of assemblies, but only in those areas where people want them. With so few executive powers it will be a Herculean job persuading people to vote for them - especially as it involves a simultaneous move to single tier local government. In this area it would probably mean the abolition of Lancashire County Council and the creation of new unitary councils in which Pendle would be amalgamated with Burnley and, perhaps, others.

Looking ahead, I shall be speaking in Earby next Friday on the possibility of a re-opened Colne to Skipton railway. It will be interesting to see what kind of audience we get. Earlier that day, I will be awarding the prizes to the successful primary school children who entered my Christmas card competition. The standard this year is higher than ever and clearly it is the Labour Government that must take credit! From the youngsters to the less young - the Government will be publishing its Pensions Green Paper on 17 December. A lot is happening in this area and perhaps we can return to it in the New Year.

Finally, the official Opposition continues to languish in the polls. The Tories are down three points since the Election, Labour unchanged and the Lib/Dems up two. The pollster, Bob Worcester, predicts that "despite the fall in satisfaction with Tony Blair, Labour still looks set to win the next election". I think we shall, but only if we deliver.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
29.11.02

Tories
unpopular
report
40%
PN
review pub.
See Action:
Kenrice

1100g taken 10 yrs - Rambles scrub - unpassive
£500m

but determined to be reasonable.

or possible

Helsinki
not this time

STABILITY PACT

hitting

Targets (1998)

Andy Fitcham
no to review

Carl Hones to
be saved? Public

REPORT TO G.C. OCTOBER 2002

ESTELLE MORRIS

This has been a momentous week at Westminster with the unprecedented resignation of the Education Secretary, Estelle Morris, saying she was unhappy in the job and she felt she had not been able to give as much to it as the job demanded. I am sorry to see her go and all my Labour colleagues were stunned when the news came through on Wednesday evening. Predictably, the Conservatives were jubilant, claiming another Cabinet rank scalp. Although the Government has had its problems over recent months with the A Level fiasco and so on, these have been of our own making. At Westminster, Ian Duncan-Smith is increasingly disregarded as a serious Leader of the Opposition and outside, with the general public, the name IDS barely registers. The fact is that oppositions do not win elections, governments lose them. To that extent, our success or failure is in our own hands. We have to deliver major improvements across all the public services by the time of the next General Election. This is no easy task, while at the same time keeping the economy on an even keel, keeping inflation low and raising living standards.

FIRE DISPUTE - 49 APPLICANTS FOR EACH VACANCY.

Against the background of low inflation, the Firefighters claim for a 40% increase is not sustainable. They have public sympathy on their side - and rightly so - because they risk their lives to protect the rest of us. Their pay has been linked to the highest level of manual workers earnings under a pay formula negotiated in the late 1970s. Since then, the Firefighters say the job they do has changed out of all recognition. I agree. The "Fire" Service really ought to be renamed the "Emergency" Service and as the skills needed for the job have changed and the demands made of the Firefighters increased, then it is right for the nature of the job to be reviewed. Unfortunately, the FBU refuses to participate in the independent Bains Review which will look, not just at remuneration, but at the nuts and bolts of the job itself. The Government is bending over backwards to be reasonable and it wants to be fair to the Firefighters, but there are fears that other groups of workers are waiting in the wings to see what happens to the Fire Fighters' claim. I believe they deserve the rate for the job - it is just that we don't know what the job entails now - and we need to put that right.

POLICE

Reg Robinson

Still on the emergency services. I had an interesting meeting with representatives of the Lancashire branch of the Police Federation today, running through the key policing issues facing the area. We have introduced a new kind of "community support officer" who will be available to walk the streets tackling second order, but nevertheless important, matters such as juvenile nuisance, anti-social behaviour, dog fouling and such like. Lancashire has been allocated 72 of these new officers and this area is getting 12. It is worth reminding ourselves that we have never had so many police officers as we have now. In Lancashire, we are, I think, up to establishment. The real issue is getting police officers out on the beat, reassuring people by their presence.

QUEEN'S SPEECH 13 NOV

This brings me to the Queen's Speech and the new Session of Parliament which opens on 13 November. Inevitably, there will be another Criminal Justice Bill (there is one every year!) allowing courts to sit later and giving judges a much bigger role in managing cases in their courts. There are a huge number of unnecessary adjournments which cost an absolute fortune and drag things out interminably.

/cont...

salaries £21,000

then big jump to station chiefs.

personnel in agric. shift work / 2nd jobs

20% increase in pay since 1997
1997 to police

9 green goddesses why have them? sold off Straker 29-31
retired engines

I am also expecting a Hunting Bill and we wait to see whether there will be any paving legislation to allow for a Euro Referendum. The Prime Minister had previously indicated there would be a Referendum this side of a General Election. We also wait to see what is being proposed for the new "Foundation" hospitals - Trusts which have performed well and have so called "earned autonomy" to borrow money and make changes to terms and conditions and so on. Some say this will be the beginning of the fragmentation of the NHS and certainly there are lots of people who have reservations about this proposal.

Housing

I also want to see a Housing Bill which will give local authorities the power to licence landlords within designated areas. I have been banging on about this proposal for about two years and I am hopeful that we shall see legislation in the forthcoming Session. This would be an effective way of tackling rogue landlords who don't give a fig about anti-social behaviour of their tenants and are content just to draw rent derived from housing benefit. The other major housing issue affecting Pendle is, of course, the "Market Restructuring Pathfinder" which promises substantial sums of money to 9 areas in England where the housing market has all but collapsed. This is the case in parts of Pendle. The statistics are compelling. A quarter of East Lancashire housing is unfit for habitation, compared with only 7% in England. A similar proportion is in disrepair. Here in East Lancashire we have 5 of the 30 worst wards in the country. I have a meeting at Burnley next Friday to discuss the whole issue.

7%
EMPTY

New Resolution
Being
debated
in UN
today

IRAQ + EURO CONVENTION

Wider afield, things have gone rather quiet over Iraq and I am relieved that we are hearing less about regime change and more about involving the UN. The PLP would split down the middle if the Prime Minister were to embark on military action without UN cover. The future of an enlarged European Union is also climbing up the agenda in terms of political importance. Ten candidate countries are due to join the EU in 2004 and this will put enormous stresses and strains on the institutions. A Convention is meeting, drawing politicians from across the EU and the candidate countries, to work out the best way of governing an EU with 26 countries. A rotating Presidency, six months per country, looks increasingly absurd and the Prime Minister has floated the idea of an EU President. Watch this space.

agreement
on
Foster
Subsidies
today
Poland
- as
bags?

Need ambiguity. No 2nd chance?

At the last GC I was asked about changes to the payment of pensions at post offices. Since then I have received this letter from the relevant Ministers, which I am enclosing.

Next Thursday I have been invited along to the Brierfield Community Centre to meet young people involved in the Youth Council. I am looking forward to it immensely.

A couple of weeks ago I visited Finland as part of a Parliamentary Delegation and found myself seated at dinner beside one of the youngest Finnish MPs - a mere 32 year old. Who was, incidentally, an ex Miss Finland and, furthermore, a former Miss Universe! I shall not disclose what we talked about!

No Finland!

GORDON PRENTICE MP
25.10.02



From the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Richmond House
79 Whitehall
London SW1A 2NS



DEPARTMENT OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY 1 VICTORIA STREET
LONDON SW1H 0ET

TELEPHONE 020 7215 6272
E-mail mpst.hewitt@dti.gsi.gov.uk
The Rt Hon PATRICIA HEWITT MP

Child Benefit

*brings together
all child related
elements of all
related support*

Dear Colleague

10 October 2002

*helps those at home
full time or who
train or study in*

CHANGES TO BENEFIT AND PENSION PAYMENTS AND NEW BANKING SERVICES AT POST OFFICES

Why we are paying people directly into accounts

As you may know, the Government has decided to phase out the order books and girocheques that many people currently use to collect their benefit or pension from the Post Office. Instead, payment directly into a bank, building society or Post Office Card Account will start to become the normal method of payment for pensions and benefits from April 2003. You may be aware that the Inland Revenue will also start to pay the new tax credits into such accounts from April 2003. This will affect a large number of your constituents so I thought it would be helpful to write to you to explain the changes.

The current system of payment by order book and giro dates back to just after the last war and modernisation is well overdue. It is expensive to administer and wide open to fraud and abuse. We believe that payment

*New
child
Tax
Credit*

*+ Working
Tax
Credit*

*extension of
nc0402.doc*

Working families Tax Credit

into accounts will provide a safer, more convenient, more modern and efficient way of paying benefits and pensions as well as promoting financial inclusion by opening up mainstream banking to customers through Basic Bank Accounts. It is already chosen by over 40 per cent of benefit recipients. And every year the trend is for more and more people to ask that we pay their money directly into their account. Last year 800,000 people opted to be paid this way.

Customer information and Post Office access

We have been keen to listen to the concerns of our customers. They told us that two of the most important things to them were to still be able to collect their money from the Post Office and also to be able to continue to collect it weekly – both of these options will be available. The Government is committed to a nationwide Post office network and is making significant investment in its modernisation. We have also discussed the changes widely with interested groups ranging from the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux to Postwatch and the sub-postmasters union, listening to their concerns and giving them an opportunity to comment on information material that will go to customers.

*Causes have been
closed.
- No one
will buy.
Paul
Commit
wants to
stop -*

Customers will have three account options when deciding how to they want to be paid:

- Current account – a standard bank or building society account.
- Bank or Building Society Basic Account – for those who are new to banking, and just want to pay money in, get cash out and perhaps pay bills automatically.
- Post Office Card Account – a simple account just for the receipt of benefit, pension and tax credit payments.

Our information campaign will have an important role to play in the way we take customers through the changes, including getting their money from their account at the Post Office if they wish. Customers will be supplied with information which clearly sets out their “account options” and enables them to decide which account is right for them. The information includes a leaflet which outlines the features associated with each account option and some frequently asked questions. Customers are also given dedicated helpline numbers.

Over 85 per cent of our customers already have access to a bank account. We expect that many will choose to have their benefit paid into an existing account, which they can access in a number of ways, including at an ATM or at a supermarket through the “cashback” system. Where the bank has a network banking arrangement with the Post Office, they will also be able to access their money at Post Offices.

Other customers will choose to use universal banking services to access their money at the Post Office. Universal banking services will consist of two elements - access to the banks’ basic bank accounts at post office branches and the Post Office card account. Universal banking services is an innovative idea that will give Post Offices significant new or replacement business and help address financial exclusion.

The conversion process

The Department faces a real challenge in changing the way we currently pay over 13 million of our existing customers. The huge numbers involved mean that we will be phasing in the changes over a two-year period starting in April 2003. This approach should ensure the process is carried out efficiently and with the minimum of disruption. The amounts of money people receive and the frequency of payment will not change.

Customers will be invited to give the Department their account details as a first step in the move. A direct mailing will go to customers, which will include information on their "account options" and an invitation letter asking them to provide these details. The process may take some time, so we will normally write to customers several months before we plan to start paying them into their account. Your constituents will not need to take any action until they receive an invitation letter – until then, they will be able to keep their order books or giros.

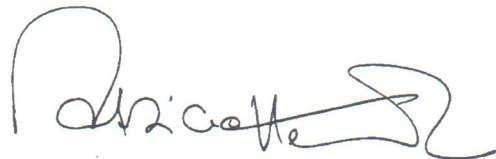
The Veterans Agency have already started to write to their customers for account details so they can pay them directly into an account from April 2003. The key dates in the DWP conversion process under current plans include invitation letters starting to go to Child Benefit customers from 28th October 2002; to Pensions customers from January 2003; and Jobcentre Plus customers will start to be contacted from March 2003.

Questions from constituents

I hope this letter has been helpful in setting out the background to the changes and the "account options" your constituents will have. No doubt, however, some of your constituents will contact you with detailed queries, particularly when they start to receive their invitation letters. Detailed questions on changes to payments and "account options" should be sent to DWP Ministers. Questions around banking at Post Offices and the future of the network should be sent to DTI Ministers.



ANDREW SMITH



PATRICIA HEWITT

REPORT TO G.C. SEPTEMBER 2002

September has been dominated by the unfolding crisis over Iraq. Parliament was recalled on Tuesday of this week to consider a dossier giving the assessment of the Government on Iraq's capacity to wage chemical, biological and nuclear war. The document certainly made chilling reading (and we all know that Saddam Hussain is a nasty piece of work) but the dossier did not, in my view, present a convincing case for going to war against Iraq. Unfortunately, we had no opportunity at Westminster to vote on a substantive motion (e.g. this House calls on the Government to declare war against Iraq) and we were left with voting on a procedural motion concerning when the debate should terminate! I was one of 53 Labour MPs who voted against the adjournment and more than 70 MPs of all Parties were in the Lobby. The Government's position was to abstain as was the official Opposition's.

I have had a large number of letters in the office about Iraq but, as yet, not a single one calling on Britain to go to war. The feeling - although it is not put in these terms - is that Britain is playing the part of the deputy sheriff, faithfully doing the sheriff's bidding. The rest of the world is very sceptical both about the motives of the American President, the timing of this whole business coming just before the US Congressional Elections on 5 November and, most importantly, the justification for action.

As I told the GC last month, and repeated at a meeting of the Co-op Party in Brierfield last Saturday, Saddam Hussain has been effectively contained since the end of the Gulf War 11 years ago. The US and the UK both police no-fly zones in Northern Iraq to protect the Iraqi Kurds and in the South to protect the Marsh Arabs. None of his neighbours (with the exception of Israel) has called on the US, UK or indeed the UN to take action against Saddam Hussain because they feel a threat to their people or territorial integrity is imminent. Indeed, Iran, a country engaged in a bloody war with Iraq in the 1980s, where over a million people lost their lives, has come out against military action. There is certainly no love lost between Iran and Iraq.

In my view we should not intervene without the sanction of the United Nations and only in accordance with International Law. At the moment only the US/UK are pressing for action and even the former US Presidential candidate, Al Gore, has said the international community has got to be brought on board. He likened it to the sheriff riding off to track down Jesse James but without the posse.

The US Administration wants "regime change" - even if the UN weapons inspectors go in and find nothing Saddam Hussain has gotta go. The UK position is different. The Prime Minister said that if the weapons inspectors are allowed in and find nothing then that's enough for him. Regime change is not a policy objective. President Bush has also promulgated this new foreign policy doctrine of the "pre-emptive strike". This would allow the US to take action against any other country it deemed to be a threat. Iran and North Korea spring to mind as two other countries forming the so called axis of evil.

There is no question that the US could get rid of Saddam Hussain but then the problems really start. In the Commons debate on Tuesday, the Shadow Foreign Secretary, Michael Ancram, spoke of his vision for a new Iraq. He said "the prize is a free, democratic Iraq". This is complete moonshine and we are all kidding ourselves if we think we could create a stable functioning democracy in a region where none exist. Any new Government in Baghdad would be seen as a client state of the US and the US would have to be prepared to stay in Iraq, in large numbers, for the medium to long term. Otherwise, there is a danger that Iraq could fracture into three statelets and the entire Middle East could be destabilised.

The Moslem world is not signed up for any action against Iraq. They believe that the US is not being even handed and that different rules apply to, for example, Israel. Certainly, when Bush unveiled his new doctrine 10 days ago, there was no mention of Israel withdrawing its settlements from the occupied territories. Since he has already committed the US Administration to a Palestinian State, I believe he should have gone the extra mile and called for this. There is also a problem about "first order and second order" UN resolutions. I am sure that there are many people here in Pendle who will be asking themselves about the status of UN resolutions on, say, Kashmir. I am sure we will be back discussing Iraq before too long.

*John Toulson; Sir William Fulkes
Sachse
by
Estelle
Norris*

Elsewhere, we have had the saga of the A Levels, the threatened Firefighters' strike, the Countryside March and Lord Archer! I found it amusing to read in the press that the posh clubs of St. James's and Pall Mall were throwing open their doors to welcome in women and children! A subsequent survey of those marching demonstrated that all but 4% of them voted Tory in the last election. It was the Conservative Party taking to the streets.

Lord Archer continues to amuse and amaze. Sentenced to 4 years for perjury in July 2001 he managed to get himself into an open prison and then a nice little job as a tea boy in the Theatre Royal in Lincoln. The press tells us today that Lady Archer said it was Jeffrey's understanding that he was allowed home and within a 55 mile radius of his open prison - and that includes Gillian Shepherd's home. I had no idea that the regime in open prisons was so congenial.

*35
miles
away!*

*ended each day at the Castle Inn! four miles
from prison*

Next week we have the Conference in Blackpool with a debate on Iraq on Monday and the Prime Minister taking to the stage (apparently one which juts out into the audience like a catwalk!) on Tuesday.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
27.9.02

*weapons inspectors meet Iraqis next week
(Edinburgh Royal f30m a year x30 years = f900m
cost f180m - f11)
transfer of risk Air Traffic control? f50 built out after 9/11
Believes*

Blair's Fabian Society pamphlet

- 1. National Standards*
- 2. New Inspectorates - audit & long term; social care etc*
- 3. New flex. inst. in professions (a) choice - school - specialised health foundation hospitals*

^{we}
America (doesn't do the dishes - US Senator
Chris Nunn to PM.

Jack Bennett

was correspondent - Sandy Walsh
in Bosnia - Canavan
media. Nasser people didn't follow it

CORRE OUT

REPORT TO G.C. 30 AUGUST 2002

I am just back in the office after some time up in Edinburgh soaking up the sunshine and the Kultur! August always seems such a lazy month, but things tend to happen in this so called holiday month. Certainly public opinion is being relentlessly softened up for the prospect of military action against Iraq.

My own position is quite clear. I would not support sending British troops into Iraq. I think military action would destabilise the entire region; would inflame opinion against the Western democracies; alienate the Islamic world; would, or could, involve the loss of thousands of lives - and with no clear idea of what "regime change" would mean in practice. Reports suggest that military action against Iraq could cost the United States \$100 billion. Iraq would be defeated - of that there is no doubt - but who would take over? There is a real danger that Iraq would break up into three statelets with the Kurds in the north agitating for their own country. There are many Kurds in Turkey who want to see this and Turkey would be destabilised too. I supported a Commons motion on 4 March this year expressing deep unease at the prospect that the British Government might support US military action against Iraq and agreeing with the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, that a further military attack on Iraq would be unwise. The EDM was supported by some 160 MPs, the overwhelming majority, Labour.

- we don't do dishes!

I have raised the issue of Iraq with the Prime Minister in the Parliamentary Committee and he has always taken refuge in the formula that no decisions are likely to be made in the short term. However, the American administration has been cranking up the rhetoric about regime change and we now have it on record that, even if the UN Weapons Inspectors were allowed back in to Iraq, this would not be enough to satisfy President Bush.

Palastine
Kashmir

C9 Em I think views in the wider Labour Party reflect the unease felt by so many of my colleagues at Westminster. Indeed, a front page story in the Times today refers to the deep reservations felt by CLP Chairs. I think 100 were approached. My own view is to stick with the policy of containment. UN sanctions have been in place for 11 years now and Sadam Hussain is still in his cage. His objectives are to secure the survival of his own regime and to get UN sanctions lifted. So far as I can tell, there is little if no evidence pointing to Sadam Hussain putting together again nuclear or chemical weapons programmes. Biological weapons maybe more difficult to be certain about as the ingredients apparently have other legitimate uses. If there is evidence, it needs to be put into the public domain. There is also, so far as I am aware, no link between the Iraqi regime and the Al-Qaida network.

dictate

Reports suggest that the most likely time for any military attack on Iraq would be between November and February when the weather is tolerable. We must wait and see how events unfold.

Emmy
planning

NOTHING OVER FOUR STOREYS
in Pull

Kinnaird - farmers.

Transport plan SCLRAP - David Curry
Boundaries review - Rachel Sabin & Simon Stone
Nigel Evans

Elsewhere, the saga of the residential care homes rumbles on. I was at one meeting called by Pendle Council a few weeks ago, but unfortunately missed another this week hosted by Burnley. While the changed position put forward by the County Council is welcome, it does not go far enough. I wrote to the Leader of the Council, Hazel Harding, asking for a note on how the Government's new policy framework, set out by Alan Milburn on 24 July, had influenced the County Council's thinking. I am waiting to hear from Hazel and she has promised to let me have this information.

On the education front, I recently attended the opening of St. Thomas' Primary School in Barrowford. This Church of England school was opened by the Bishop of Blackburn, who always seems incredibly jolly. The school is in complete contrast to the old one which is about 150 years old and totally unsuitable for learning. Children cannot be expected to give of their best when they are crowded into dark, poky classrooms belonging to another era.

I have also been down to Nelson & Colne College to hear about an important community education research project examining the barriers to learning faced by women here in Pendle. I had the opportunity to chat to Bushra Sarowat, the researcher and there is clearly a huge amount of work needs to be done to increase participation by Asian women especially in the labour market.

Lancashire County Council and the Lancashire Unitary Authorities have just published the Structure Plan which is out for consultation. Comments are requested by 2 October and this may be something we can return to at the September GC. The county is still wedded to the A56 village bypass as is Pendle Council, but I have to say my own sympathies lie with those who wish to see the old railway line re-opened. Why can't any of the big public authorities do some lateral thinking? The papers this week have been full of articles about transport matters - whether it is the West Coast Mainline closing for two separate periods of four months to get the upgrade finished with - or whether it is the steady unstoppable increase in the number of cars on our roads.

Looking forward, we will be hearing about hunting with dogs yet again when public hearings are held on September 9, 10 & 11, involving the three main protagonists. Close on the heels of that, we shall see the so called Liberty & Livelihood March descend on London on 22 September. Hunting with dogs will be banned and now is not the time for anyone to lose their nerve. The Government has indicated that the bill in brings forward can be amended on a free vote in the House of Commons. If the bill, as amended is rejected by the House of Lords the Government will trigger the Parliament Act to put it on the statute book.

The Earth Summit has not figured large. But I got to thinking how much difference \$100 billion would make to Africa. In Botswana, a country I visited this time last year, the life expectancy of a baby born now is 27.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
30.8.02

Gray

and no vote needed
in Parliament

Tuesday Party will be properly
counted! Dominic this notice

- Contain Hussein - as ^{the} ~~country~~ ^{armed} with
- No letters of support for war from constituents
- Rich Middle East in flames
- alienating Muslim world
- US not even hinted at called for
withdrawal of settlements from occupied
territories
- new Kurdish state
Turkey destabilised

- Regime change? To what
very few democracies in Mid East
- US support Saudi Arabia where
women not allowed to drive cars!

for doing ^{SYLVIA - BILL} good things - Botswana
UK aid by now £26 in 1997
AIDS 27 (1)
Coffins windhoek
century

£3.36 last year 2001
£4.66 by 2006

35% real terms increase since 2001
93% " " " " £ 1997

1½ m more people in work than
5 years ago. low inflation

last year paid off more debt than
all previous years in last 50 years.

20 years ago, debt interest = 4% of
national income

Now debt interest 2% - with £206
a year

plenty money but people have got
to see the results Delivery (no
expensive
re-organisation)

POLICY MAKING
PROCESS

Required
govt -
no extra
money

Bill Whittaker - topical issues
~~State Exch~~ Banknotes - fraudulent
FT f1 in pond house

(You don't
know this)
(2)

Charles Fathens - f1000 house. Bursfield
Burdle Hill.

Plenty of money Eurofights f356 each 232
RITF

FED f26 BSE f3 billion

gap between rich & poor now been wider

Quizzed PD @ PLP. Explicit policy objective.

f29,000 as f29m pass tax rate of 40p.

Wider than under Tories

Talking to farmers ALNA INN

Countywide Alliance 280,000 in border (3)

- protesting outside my office? plate down

- Liberty & Livelihood

↳ to talk for free - Tories as Bar Williams
Steve Norris

Chane courting

problem areas such as ~~rabbits~~ ratting

endless consultation.

~~if hords veto~~. Common can amend
pub Bill. If hords reject. Public Act

like Right to Roam endless consultation.

breeds cynicism. put us through

Livelihood 70% land owners not

tenant farmers Are problems

Dispute

↳ MOVE AWAY FROM PRODUCTION
SUBSIDIES

We don't sell land to developers
poison land with pesticides

Rural hsg; transport etc,

|| down side of full
footprint
in transference
of town +
country

Duke of
Westminster
Albany Street

BNP

antagonism towards Labour Party

—
Residential care - partnership
| care of the elderly - still resonates
as an issue

— Tony Martin

— Fineman

— care afford issue to drift

REPORT TO G.C. 26.7.2002

The G.C. met unusually in mid month to hear a presentation about the County Council's approach to the residential care homes issue which has been dominating the local press for months. We now know that the County Council wants to make significant changes to its original proposals but there are still controversial changes coming up. Here in Pendle, Cravenside will be retained, although its future will be reviewed again in four years or so. Favordale would stay but Wheatley Court and Walverdene would be subject to further discussions. However, they would close as residential care homes on a phased basis. Pendle Brook House in Barrowford would also close.

The Government made an important announcement on services for older people on Tuesday of this week. And I asked Hazel Harding to consider the implications before pressing ahead. However, I fear the dye had been cast. The Government indicated that it was now planning to increase the number of care home places supported by local councils and relax some of the standards applying to residential care homes. I understand the County Council's Cabinet will meet on Thursday 1 August to consider the revised proposals. I have gone through the papers sent to me by the County but have yet to come across any detailed analysis of the results of the original consultation.

In Westminster the big event of the month was the Comprehensive Spending Review which promises to pump an additional £61 billion into our public services by 2006. How has the Chancellor managed to do this? Unemployment is low. One and a half million more people are in work since 1997 and they are paying taxes. Inflation is low and despite the world wide economic turbulence following 11 September and, now the big accounting scandals in the US, so far the UK economy seems to be weathering the storm.

One or two facts. Last year the Government paid off more debt than all previous governments in the last 50 years. Twenty years ago, debt interest payments consumed 4% of national income. Debt interest is now half that, just 2% - a saving worth £20 billion a year. Twenty years ago, 1.6% of national income was spent on the cost of unemployment. Now we spend 0.4% - savings worth a further £10 billion a year. We can use this money not just to boost prosperity here at home, but also overseas as well. UK aid to developing countries was £2 billion in 1997, £3.3 billion last year and will rise to £4.9 billion by 2006. A 93% real terms increase since 1997.

A lot of this extra money will be going into education and the headteachers of our local primary schools will be getting £50,000 next April and an additional £50,000 each April for the following two years to spend as the school wishes. For our secondary schools, the heads will be getting £165,000 next April and then £180,000 for the next two years, making in total half a million pounds in direct payments to our headteachers to be used as they wish.

The big problem here in Pendle and elsewhere in East Lancashire is, of course, the appalling state of our private sector housing. In Pendle our council and social housing is pretty good, but in the private sector we have empty and abandoned properties and houses that should have been knocked down a generation ago. Pendle is one of nine "pathfinder" areas where in some of these areas the housing market has collapsed.

RT with TH. *Jude Brown* *Half full*
// 400,000 properties will benefit.
// how much private sector money to be levered in? £1250

I have told John Prescott and the Prime Minister that what is being offered is simply not enough to tackle the problem. £500 million has been earmarked over the next three years. Much more is needed.

Although the vast majority of people are better off since 1997 there is, in my view, a gap opening up between the very poorest and the very richest. A two speed Britain where some people are doing very well and others struggling to make ends meet. Jane Griffiths, the Labour MP for Reading told me it is impossible to buy a house there for less than £167,000. In much of the South and South East, people on modest wages simply cannot afford to buy. Rents are also punitive. It is little wonder then that the unions organising the council strike this month cite this as one of the factors driving them to militancy. We have spoken before about Regional policy, but as I told the Prime Minister just a couple of days ago it is a core responsibility of Central Government to iron out the imbalances and inequalities between regions.

3 runways at Stansted Elsewhere at Westminster consultation papers have been churning out. The latest one is on Airports policy but earlier this month we had an important statement on Entitlement Cards (or ID cards). I am more relaxed about ID cards than some colleagues, but there is an important caveat. Members of the public have to know what is held on these cards. There can be no cross-referencing, linking up local councils, the benefits agencies, the health service. This would be a real threat to our civil liberties. The Home Secretary says he wants a debate and the consultation period runs until next year.

We have also had the Anderson Report on the lessons to be learned from foot & mouth. And a few months ago, we had the Curry Report on Food & Farming which recommended a move away from production subsidies towards payments for supplying "public goods" such as countryside access and promoting environmental best practice in the countryside.

£1m extra Back home here in Pendle, former Burnley Trust has been awarded three stars. Well done Azhar! And approval has also been given to merge Burnley NHS Trust with Blackburn to form a new East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust. I supported this proposal. In Nelson we have the unfolding debate about the new Health Centre and where it should be located. The Primary Trust has been looking at Yarn Spinners Wharf next to Morrison's Supermarket and I am not hostile to this.

Coming up, we have the Countryside March in September and again, early that month, we have three days of public inquiry on hunting with dogs. Talk about the Government chasing its own tail! There is also speculation that the US might unleash another Desert Storm against Iraq. The Prime Minister has been very circumspect about this whole issue, constantly telling the PLP that no decision has been taken. On this, as with so many other issues, I find his insouciance quite astonishing.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
26.7.02.

PF1

f8m

REPORT TO G.C. 28 JUNE 2002

I was at Roy Clarkson's funeral yesterday, along with other colleagues. He was a Tory of the old school and I remember how, early on, he used to describe me as "the worst kind of Socialist" but I took that as a badge of honour! The valediction summed him up. He was very blunt and you always knew where you stood with him. I was sorry to see him go.

THIS SPORTING LIFE!

This morning I was at Seedhill Sportsground officiating (in parts) with the Great Pendle Schools Commonwealth Games! All the participating schools represented Commonwealth countries complete with flags and emblazoned teeshirts. I effortlessly started the relay race and generally had a great time.

BACK TO SCHOOL

The same cannot be said for my visit to Nelson & Colne College last Friday, where I had a meeting with the Principal, Kath Belton and her senior staff to discuss the crisis in FE funding. FE colleges can get between £1600/£1700 per student. Secondary schools between £2600/£4000. Before seeing the Principal I had a meeting with the Lecturers and was put through the mangle with Richard MacSween turning the handle! They raised issues about differential resources between FE colleges and schools, the widening pay gap between lecturers and teachers in schools (as much as £5000); student funding; Afghanistan; Iraq ... Seriously, it was good to get their views and I subsequently had a chance to put the issue to the Prime Minister in our weekly meeting - sandwiched between Seville and the G8 in Canada. In fact, a consultation paper on the future of FE was published on 19 June. Copies are available from my office or on the internet.

Last week I also visited Primet School in Colne and had an opportunity to chat to the Head, Janet Walsh, who has been in post for about eighteen months. I have been invited to speak to the Pendle Forum which brings together all the local Heads and I shall look forward to that. There is much to discuss. The Education Secretary, Estelle Morris, has set the cat amongst the pigeons with her speech on the "new comprehensive era". She says she wants to reform and modernise the structure of the comprehensive system. She says one failing of the comprehensives is that they are too uniform. She wants to see more specialist schools, city academies and such like. Clearly the pressure is on for comprehensives to go for specialist school status.

WORLD.COM

A lot has been happening at Westminster. The gigantic fraud at World.com and its implications for us here in the UK is now being digested. Its UK equivalent would be BT collapsing overnight. World.com was bigger than the economy of Greece. Astonishing thought. There is a debate to be had about unregulated capitalism and how we protect the public against swashbuckling and rapacious "entrepreneurs".

Ken - FE Stammers. Railtrack - into administration - PLP

£680 to

agreement reached today

RAILTRACK R.I.P.

Elsewhere, we are seeing the final winding up of Railtrack and the creation of a not for profit company, Network Rail, to take over the running of the network. And not before time. The media gave Stephen Byers a hard time over his decision to put Railtrack into administration and since then it has been one thing after another.

The press has gone for the Government with a vengeance for the past month or so, but for this attack to succeed we have got to continue to make serious mistakes. We cannot afford to give the press an open goal as we did, astonishingly, with the so called "snooper's charter". These were orders made under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 which would give government departments, local authorities and other organisations such as the Food Standards Agency, powers to get e.mail addresses (not the contents of e.mails) from private individuals. This could extend to internet sites visited also. This was a wholly unjustified intrusion on the privacy of private individuals. The orders were withdrawn by Blunkett which is just as well, I would never have voted for them.

A HEALTHY FUTURE

CB estimates all health costs UK industry £12 billion a year.

Most people are more interested in the World Cup, Wimbledon and Cricket and in those things that touch their own lives - health, education, pensions and the like. The Government will be publishing its Comprehensive Spending Review next month which will allocate cash to the spending programmes and everyone realises the time for talking is over and we have got to deliver. We are making progress. I have been looking at the number of students now at medical school. In autumn 2001 the medical school intake in England was 950 more than in 1997 and by autumn next year should be over 1950 more than in autumn 1997. This is a 52% increase - the largest increase since the NHS was established. There are other big increases coming through in the number of consultants too.

FAIR TRADE

£6.8 billion would be needed to meet the target

We had a lobby by the Trade Justice Movement down at Westminster. There were a number of people from Pendle but, tragically, I missed them all. Clearly much more needs to be done, but the British Government has made a pretty good start. The Government is committed to the internationally agreed target to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015. We have already extinguished debt of many of the world's poorest countries.

only 10 out of 45 are covered in Africa

Here at Carr Road we continue to offer a top class, seamless service to the people of Pendle! I hope to have a couple of young people in over the summer on work experience to help Helen, Ruth and myself to run the show.

Gordon Prentice MP

28.6.02

- Policy Forum. Views not taken on board!

Countries in East Africa since 1975

% of their people living in poverty fell from 57% to 21%

hundreds of millions out of poverty

REPORT TO G.C. 31st MAY 2002

It has been so long since we last met as a GC I hardly know where to begin. So much has happened. The local elections earlier this month provided a test of public opinion and the Party, nationally and here in East Lancashire, did relatively well. Certainly there is no sign of a stampede by the voters towards the Conservatives. However, the rise of the BNP is a matter for grave concern. Although they only took 3 seats over in Burnley, the BNP attracted 10,000 votes or 30% of the votes cast. We need to address issues such as poor housing which the BNP exploits and then uses to build support for racist policies.

Here in Pendle we held our own in very difficult circumstances. Yes, we lost a few seats, but with the care homes issue raging, there was always the potential of losing many more. We have a problem over in West Craven which has no Labour representative at all and we shall need to work hard to rebuild support. We are now approaching the end of the care homes consultation and it will be absolutely fascinating to see how much support the county's proposals have secured. The final decision will be taken on 14 June.

I was very sorry to see good comrades going down at the polls, but we also have some new councillors who will bring fresh energy and commitment!

RESHUFFLE

Nationally, we have seen the departure from Government of Stephen Byers - fatally wounded by thousands of hostile articles in the press since the infamous e.mail from Jo Moore of 11 September. The press had it in for him because they believed him to be a serial liar. I do not believe he was, although he may have been on occasion "economical with the truth". Stephen will now be joining the rest of us on the back benches, where I feel very comfortable! There are some good people being promoted into the Government and one or two less good who are - astonishingly - still there! John Prescott is now back in charge of Local Government and the Regions after his own creation - the super Ministry of the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions - was broken up, letting Transport float free. This was precisely where I came in! I was PPS to the Minister of Transport in 1997 when Transport was swallowed up into the new giant department.

TRANSPORT - BACK ON THE RAILS?

Transport has been bad news for the Government for many years. There was the disastrous legacy of rail privatisation and the vacillation over the future of RailTrack. We have seen the terrible accidents at Hatfield and Potters Bar. There has been the controversy over the future funding of the London Underground. We have seen the privatisation of Air Traffic Control - a policy taken through the Party on a body swerve with no one except one or two at the very top, committed to it. Now the privatised NATS (National Air Traffic Services) is knocking at the Government's door asking for a bail out.

Which reminds me. Peter Mandelson is just about to bring out a second edition of his 1996 book on New Labour. He tells us that in the first term of the Labour Government, there was too much spin and that in certain policy areas the Government either got it wrong or was too timid. Given that Mandelson was absolutely central to the "project" and was in it up to his elbows, it does take quite a bit of brass neck to set himself up as a disinterested critic and observer of that first Labour Government.

Spoke at NEC college
- Kath Dalton - ed to her
Comp Spending Review more
money for FE Cindarella Sevin
- Richard McSwain
+ 10000 gap.

In this, the second term, we must deliver and ease off on the rhetoric. People round here want to see changes - or at least evidence that change is taking place. Huge expensive reorganisations sometimes make it difficult to deliver and I keep my fingers crossed that the big organisational changes taking place in the NHS nationally and locally do not cause us to take our eye off the ball.

REGIONS

It follows that I am just a little concerned about the Government's latest proposals for Regional Government. The new regions will be based on the existing eight standard regions of England and any new regional assembly would have to be approved and voted for in regional referendums. A regional tier would mean the abolition of one existing tier of local government and the creation of new unitary authorities. Whether the public want another layer of politicians at regional level is a matter for debate. However, this is a subject that we can discuss locally before the end of the consultation period in August.

Elsewhere in Europe we have seen the rise of the Far Right and the growth of Islamophobia. How we begin to discuss the issues of race and nationality from a "left perspective" is difficult, but there are certain issues we really must address.

KASHMIR

We all look nervously at the unfolding events in South Asia. I have been wrestling with this issue of Kashmir for years now and it is difficult to know how best to find a solution. India regards Kashmir as an integral part of the Indian Union and is only willing to negotiate bilaterally with Pakistan. For its part, Pakistan wants to internationalise the conflict and involve everyone else - including us here in Britain - in brokering a settlement. Then there are the Kashmiris themselves. Maybe the answer is to involve one of the small neutral European states such as Sweden or Norway?

Finally, and back at home, we have the continuing controversy about the voting irregularities. Quite apart from what the law of the land may say, I think there are a number of practices which are questionable. This should not be a Labour, Liberal Democrat or, indeed, Conservative thing. There has to be a cross-party approach. I raised the issue with the Home Secretary fully three years ago and the then Review of Voting Procedures did not tighten things up enough. It is something we need to re-visit. Perception is everything in politics and if people believe - rightly or wrongly - we are fiddling elections, retribution, when it comes, will be swift and severe.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
31.5.02

Towed
Robert.
Review voting in blocks

PARLIAMENTARY REPORT TO AGM : FEBRUARY 2002

WHO CARES?

A huge amount has been happening over recent weeks. The local press, understandably, has been dominated by the residential care homes issue. I spoke to the Chair of Lancashire Social Services, Chris Cheetham, just before the proposals became public and he told me he thought there might be a reaction from residents and their relatives, but not from the wider public. Wrong. I have been round all five homes in Pendle talking to the Managers and others and there is anxiety and - amongst some of the relatives - anger.

People everywhere are united in their concern about the way in which the proposals came forward. The County seems to have offered only one option - going down from 48 to 13 residential care homes - without laying out alternatives which could be seriously considered. It seems to me there has been next to no discussion with alternative providers in the private or voluntary sectors and the references to workers' co-operatives seems to have very little substance at all. I am also concerned that there seems to have been little - if any - discussion with the NHS in the north west to consider the implications for the hospitals if numbers of frail elderly have nowhere else to go and end up bed blocking.

The County says it has been forced into this position by the Government and that it would cost over £14 million to bring its residential homes up to the standards set by the Government. But these very same standards will apply to the private sector too and it is not yet clear how many private homes will or can be adapted to meet the new criteria. Chris Cheetham will be interviewed this Sunday on BBC2 - Northwestminster at 1pm. On Tuesday I will be leading on the one and a half hour debate on residential care with the Minister, Jacqui Smith, responding and most - if not all - Lancashire MPs contributing.

FLOODED OUT

Elsewhere, this endless downpour has reminded us of the inadequacy of much of the infrastructure round here to cope successfully with all this water. Last week I spoke to people who had been flooded out over at Ghyll Meadows in Barnoldswick and there are problems too at Barrowford. Work is promised and it is work that has to be done.

FLYING VISIT

On Tuesday at Westminster I shall be hosting a North West Aerospace Alliance event promoting the industry and reminding MPs and Ministers just how important aerospace is to the economy of the north west. Denis Mendoros will be speaking on behalf of the N.W.A.A. and he will no doubt be in good spirits as he is collecting his gong (OBE) from Buckingham Palace on Monday. For myself, I shall have an opportunity of a brief chinwag with Her Majesty at one of a number of events put on to commemorate the Jubilee. I shall be respectful, but I shall not bow!

/cont...

over 80,000
(excluding dependants)
nearly over 100,000
last year

number of people
marrying in Pendle
in 5 years doubled
since 1990 - when
communities here
have grown.

CHANGING THE WORLD

The Government continues to churn out policy White Papers as if there is no tomorrow. We have had the Policing White Paper (with PCs giving it a raspberry today) and the Immigration & Asylum White Paper which, bravely, touched on very sensitive issues such as arranged marriages. I was one of forty plus Labour MPs who voted against the Government on faith schools. I think the GC knows my views. We have seen a consultation paper on mercenaries and yet another from the Department of Education on education for fourteen to nineteen year olds.

parallel
communities

Since the last GC, the Public & Administration Select Committee has published its report on the reform of the Lords and the overwhelming number of Labour MPs want to see a small elected Second Chamber. John Prescott is still banging on about a maximum of 20% elected, despite the fact that the Conservatives and Liberals are both now pushing for a ratio of 80% elected to 20% appointed. Watch this space.

BAD NEWS

Away from the intricacies of the Constitution, the Government has had a difficult time in a whole range of other policy areas. The railways continue to provide endless headlines; the part privatised Air Traffic Control has come to the Government for financial help following the down-turn post 11 September; the NHS is another source of endless comment ranging from our Spanish GPs here in Lancashire to the teams of German surgeons being brought across to Plymouth to tackle the waiting lists.

2006

On top of this, we have had reports from the new Post Office Regulator, Postcomm, saying he wants to let other companies into the postal market. Consignia and the postal unions say this can't be done without threatening the universal service obligation to deliver at the same price a letter anywhere in the UK. The Government is trying to keep out of this but will, inevitably, be caught in the crossfire as it is Consignia's sole shareholder. To cap it all, we read that the top people at the Post Office now recoil from the name "Consignia" but they can't afford to go back to the Post Office - a brand name familiar and instantly recognisable across the country!

Consignia
to
Post Office
John Roberts

Chris Riddell

Palamangul

As if all this wasn't enough, the Government has had to cope with the buffeting caused by the Romanian steel affair. I think perhaps on balance there is a case for State funding of political parties. The unions are increasingly reluctant to finance a Party which acts in a way which they see as inimical to their interests (the list grows ever longer - GMB, UNISON, RMT and now the Communication Workers). And do we really want to take money from rich business people? These donations, quite rightly, now have to be published, something this Government did which the Conservatives would never have done. We also need to sort out the unfinished business such as hunting with dogs. This is now an issue of credibility which must be addressed this year.

"Sutton
Palamangul
-> PLP
how to
deal"

Back to Pendle, I was interested to read the new draft Community Safety Strategy. There is still a huge amount of work that needs to be done but we are making progress. CCTV for Colne will undoubtedly go down well.

Ken - Post Office

GORDON PRENTICE MP
22.2.02

Consignia to
Post Office
John Roberts

Trevor

Robert - language teacher
Trevor

REPORT TO G.C. JANUARY 2002

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

For most of the week I have been in Strasbourg on the French/German border at a meeting of the Council of Europe, which brings together representatives of Parliaments from 43 European countries. Its membership goes well beyond that of the European Union and its decisions carry no legal, but sometimes, some moral weight. There were debates on WTO, human rights, the situation in the Middle East and drugs policies and gave me my first experience of electronic voting. I returned to Britain yesterday to be greeted by blaring headlines about the NHS and the events at Whittington Hospital.

HEALTH SERVICE

I have often felt uncomfortable in the Commons Chamber hearing colleagues or those from Opposition Parties give details (with permission) of the terrible things that have happened to their constituents in the NHS. I think this kind of material has to be used with great circumspection, even if the MP has the permission of the person involved.

The structure of the Health Service is undergoing radical change and whether or not it delivers visible improvements we wait to see. The proposed system of patient involvement with patient advocacy and liaison bodies and such like is hugely complicated. And I supported an amendment to the Health Reform Bill proposed by the Labour Chair of the Health Select Committee, David Hinchcliffe, which had been backed by the soon to be doomed Community Health Councils. We are told that these structural changes are necessary to get service delivery improvements. I spent part of the afternoon today with David Peat, the new Chief Executive of the Burnley, Pendle & Rossendale Primary Care Trust, which will have a budget of around £200m and employ about 12,000 people. The PCT will, I hope, mesh together other health and social care providers such as local councils and deliver better health for the area.

COMMUNITY COHESION

At the last GC I mentioned the disturbances in Burnley, Oldham and Bradford and I have been keen to find out from local Asian organisations their views of the report prepared by Ted Cante and a Ministerial Working Group led by John Denham. I am now in the process of meeting local organisations under "Chatham House" rules, where we can talk honestly and openly about the changes that need to be made. We have a new Race Relations (Amendment) Act which comes into force in April this year. It will oblige all public authorities - such as councils, the police and Health Service, to give a breakdown annually of the workforce by ethnicity. We need to identify areas which we need to tackle. I want to see the profile of the Asian community match that of the white community in terms of income distribution, women's participation in the labour force, in education and so on.

/over...

AEROSPACE INDUSTRY

Locally, Rolls Royce is again in the news with workers at Barnoldswick voting to cut their working week to save at least some of the jobs which would otherwise go. These are indeed difficult times and I shall be hosting a meeting at Westminster on 26 February which will bring together people from the North West Aerospace Alliance and local movers and shakers such as Dennis Mendoros with Ministers and colleagues interested in defence and aerospace issues. Rolls Royce is a private sector company and it is simply not possible for the Government to step in and run it as if it were still in the public sector.

RAILWAYS

The railways, unfortunately, represent the clearest possible example of an industry which should never have been privatised. Under British Rail, we certainly had curly sandwiches and some appalling customer service standards and these should have been addressed vigorously. The French railway SNCF, runs immaculate trains at high speed and where decent food is served. Instead the Tories gave us this botched up privatisation with Railtrack paying dividends to shareholders when it should have been maintaining the track and 26 train operating companies whose service standards have, in many cases, been lamentable. The wave of strikes afflicting the industry shows the difficulty it is in and the Government must make transport a top priority. I shall be speaking to a local group of railway enthusiasts who want to open the old Colne-Skipton railway line and I shall be interested to hear what they have to say.

HOUSE OF LORDS

January has seen continuing controversy over the future make-up of the House of Lords and yesterday afternoon in a four and a half hour session, I had the opportunity to quiz the Lord Chancellor, Derry Irvine and my old sparring partner Lord (Dennis) Stevenson - the arrogant snob who said last year, when announcing the list of "people's peers", that hairdressers could not "cut it" in the House of Lords. After yesterday's exchange he won't be saying that, or anything similar again, and I want to see him out of a job! For those who are interested in such things, the evidence session goes out on BBC Parliament on Sunday evening.

POLICE

The local press reported today about the extra police on the streets in Barnoldswick and Earby and this is what we all want to see. I want to get the police out from behind their desks and into the community and the Government's new Police Bill - published today - has this as its central objective.

G.C.REPORT 25.1.02

GORDON PRENTICE MP

circumstances - [traffic warden]
- appraisal of chief constables

Ashbur

→ Public Task Force

Ken → Public Service ethos

Uni 'Scam on his back -
setting change.

Dennis Pearce

REPORT TO GC 30 NOVEMBER 2001

ROLLS ROYCE

The news yesterday that 295 Rolls Royce workers at Barnoldswick are to be made redundant comes as a huge blow. This is close on one third of the total workforce (1080) at the two sites in Barnoldswick. As if this isn't bad enough, there are other redundancies coming through from elsewhere in the aerospace sector, all attributable to the events of 11 September. I raised this issue in the Commons yesterday, along with other colleagues representing constituents which are home to Rolls Royce plants, calling for the Government to make as much help available to the industry as possible.

The Company is making 3800 people redundant across the UK and they have decided on this number after assessing the implications of the anticipated fall in orders next year. The company says that there will be a 30% reduction in workload next year. There will be a Lobby of Parliament by aerospace workers next Wednesday (5 December) and I shall be meeting the Chief Executive of Rolls Royce, John Rose and other Board members on 11 December. There are suggestions that the company is using the 11 September as an excuse to make deeper cuts that might otherwise be justified. I shall be speaking to the local union representatives to see what they have to say.

BURNLEY BY-ELECTION

Although Rolls Royce dominates the agenda, much else has been happening. It was good to see the result of the by-election in Burnley yesterday, with Labour re-taking the seat and giving us overall control of Burnley Council. However, the size of the BNP vote, at close to 20%, is deeply worrying.

WESTMINSTER

Here at Westminster, Afghanistan continues to dominate and I am certainly keeping my fingers crossed that things are now moving towards a conclusion. I want to see the end of the Taleban and Osama bin Laden brought to justice. The Commons rushed through the Anti-Terrorism legislation in next to no time and it is now in the Lords who will, inevitably, make changes. I have been broadly supportive of the Government and voted for the Bill, although I did not support the vote on the clauses to bring in a new offence of religious hatred. It did not fit comfortably in this Bill and it was anomalous taking this action while allowing the offence of Blasphemy (which only applies to Christianity) to remain on the Statute Book. There was also no definition of "religion" so the Moonies, Voodooism and anything else you care to name would be caught up in it.

/cont...

Elsewhere, on the legislative front, the Commons has rushed through a Bill (in double quick time) banning the possibility of human cloning. A High Court judgement exposed a loophole in the current law and this was a measure needed to close it. We also have the Employment Bill in Committee and this will give 6 months paid and a further 6 months unpaid maternity leave for working mothers. And, for the first time, the law will recognise the rights of working fathers by providing 2 weeks paternity leave. More controversially, we also have the NHS Reform and Health Care Provisions Bill going through the legislative pipeline and there are many who have expressed big reservations about it. This is the Bill which will abolish Community Health Councils and set up a new structure for patient involvement in the NHS.

PRE BUDGET REPORT

*pension up £3 in April
4.80 weekly*

The major event of the week here at Westminster was, of course, the Pre Budget Report and it is a tribute to the stewardship of Gordon Brown that the economy is still in a pretty healthy state, notwithstanding the terrible problems facing aerospace that I mentioned earlier. The American economy is now in recession, but here in the UK we expect over 2% growth this year. This is important because if the economy is growing and more people are in work, then more cash goes into the Treasury coffers which could be paid over to our key services. I know exactly what this can mean, for last week I visited the Marsden Community School in Percy Street and saw what they have done with the £1 mill. they got from the Government's New Deal for Schools.

The Pre Budget Report confirmed that there will be a guaranteed minimum increase of £100 a year, every year, in the basic State Pension - although I am hoping for much more. There will be a new pension credit from 2003, giving 5.4 million pensioners as much as £1000 more and the very popular Winter Fuel payment will be paid at £200 each year for the rest of this Parliament.

The Commons also agreed to an up-rating of Benefits this week.

STILL AT WESTMINSTER

I am writing this on Friday morning here at Westminster. I am in London to support my colleague, Des Turner MP, whose Home Energy Conservation Bill is coming up for its Second Reading. Private Members' Bills can easily be sabotaged as a result of the arcane procedures at Westminster and I am here to show my support and vote for the Bill should that be necessary to get it into Committee.

*the average
claim*

GORDON PRENTICE MP
30.11.01

*David - My business
faith schools*

Dorothy - employment bill

*Stamp
duty
funds
over 60
business
1% over
£60*

11

savings

REPORT TO GC : 26 OCTOBER 2001

The past month has been unusually busy. Of course, the conflict in Afghanistan still dominates the media and as I write this in Nelson (Friday), the Commons is meeting to hear a statement on the possibility of British Forces being deployed in Afghanistan. The picture of civilian victims of the bombing is traumatising and I told the Prime Minister on Wednesday that support for the action in Afghanistan would only hold if the innocent were not caught up in the fighting and became casualties themselves. However, the plain fact is that Osama bin Laden (OBL) must be brought to justice and if the Taleban won't hand him over then the Taleban Government must be changed.

OBL has in his sights not just the USA and Britain (you will remember he advised Muslims here not to fly or to go into high buildings) but Muslim countries too. Yesterday I met the High Commissioner for Pakistan, Abdul Kadir Jaffer, at Westminster and he quoted General Musharraf saying that terrorism was like a tree that had to be up-rooted. The Pakistan Government - despite the obvious difficulties in parts of that country - is like us, committed to seeing OBL brought to justice. Pakistan makes the point that they already have to cope with 2.5 million Afghan refugees and they simply cannot cope with any more. For this reason the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is closed, although I have argued for the opening of the border with the international community fully underwriting the costs of this to Pakistan. We simply cannot allow Pakistan to shoulder this burden and for the rest of the world to walk away - as it did after the Soviet Union left Afghanistan.

RAILTRACK While Afghanistan dominates, other big issues have also come to the fore. At long last, the Government has grasped the nettle of Railtrack and is now doing what many of us have argued for years. Railtrack was always a phoney kind of private company because its income was largely dependant on cash coming from the Government. The management was poor, the company did not deliver and the Government cannot stand by and watch a vital national infrastructure such as the railway, decay. I still believe that if the train operating companies fail to deliver and do not meet the terms of their franchise, they should be brought back in some form into the public sector.

HOUSING Last week the Housing Minister, Charlie Falconer visited Pendle as part of a "sweep" through East Lancashire. I have this afternoon just read an article written for the Lancashire Evening Telegraph and he was clearly impressed by the people he met and the countryside he travelled through. He also saw some of the most run-down housing in the country, where the housing market has completely collapsed. He paid tribute to the partnership working between the various councils and agencies working in East Lancashire and the analysis of the problem which is shared by, I think, all the political parties. The scale of the problem is too big for us to do it on our own. We need Central Government to declare East Lancashire a housing priority area and to give us the funds (and streamline procedures) to help us get on with the job. On this point, Peter Pike and I will be meeting Andrew Smith and people from the Treasury to go through some of these issues in detail.

ROLLS ROYCE The events of 11 September have had a huge knock-on effect on manufacturing industry and Aerospace has been particularly badly hit. Over in Barnoldswick people wait with bated breath to hear how many jobs are going at the two plants in the town.

/cont...

In smaller companies across the region jobs are being lost. This is a direct consequence of 11 September and clearly if people do not want to fly we can't make them. The top priority must be to make people feel safe again when getting on to a plane. I am pressing Gordon Brown to look again at easing the impact of the Airport Departure Tax and to look at shouldering most of the costs of the additional airport security measures and some of the costs of insurance and indemnity cover for acts of terrorism.

BSE Elsewhere, we are still coping with the aftermath of foot and mouth. In the past week we have seen two important reports - one from Lord Haskins and the other from the Rural Task Force - coming forward with suggestions as to how the rural economy can be resuscitated after foot and mouth. I know from my local surgery that farmers are having a hard time and there sense of frustration with the Government and officialdom boiled over last week when we learned with horror that the tests which had been devised to see whether sheep in the early 1990's had contracted BSE had been rendered useless because cows brains had been used instead of sheep brains. For hundreds of years sheep have had scrapie which has had no effect on human health at all, but BSE would be something completely different. I asked Margaret Beckett this week how this mix up had occurred and she told me the brains that were analyzed were in the form of a paste. Heads must roll!

NORTHERN IRELAND On a more positive note, we have seen real progress in the situation in Northern Ireland with the IRA finally agreeing to de-commission its arms. This momentous event is, apparently, not going to be televised and there are no details of where the arms caches are, but this historic decision will be independently verified. A real breakthrough

CRIME DOWN We also have encouraging signs from the British Crime Survey that crime is falling. The BCS tells us that the crime rate in England and Wales fell by 12% last year. We are told that this is the result of improved car and home security and the impact of local crime reduction and police initiatives. I suspect, however, that many people will simply not believe the figures and it is a constant battle to reassure people that their chances of being caught up in a violent criminal act is negligible.

CANNABIS Finally, we had the Government's welcome U turn on cannabis. Given that I have been championing for years the medicinal use of cannabis, I feel vindicated. After all, cannabis was prescribed by doctors before the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act and 30 years later we shall be putting it back into the medicine cabinet. Amazingly, in today's edition of the Craven Herald - which still uses spiky gothic type faces - the editor has backed the re-classification of cannabis, and then goes on to argue for its legalisation. Who would have believed this possible? Once the law has been changed (and it will require legislation) the police will be free to concentrate on the real nasty drugs - the Class A horrors of heroin and crack cocaine which destroy the body and personality in equal measures.

GORDON PRENTICE MP

26.10.01

Anti-Dot CIC report

Report to GC Friday 29 September 2001

The attacks on New York and Washington and the loss of so many lives still cast a huge shadow 18 days after the event. All right thinking people agree we must track down and bring to justice those who are responsible. However, we must ensure that the innocent are not caught in the firing line.

We must assume that deranged fanatics who are prepared to fly a plane into a skyscraper are prepared to do anything for their cause - perhaps by crashing a plane into a nuclear power station or poisoning a city's water supply. These are no longer fanciful propositions.

Downing Street

On Monday of this week, I was at No 10 to discuss the situation with the Prime Minister and other colleagues from the PLP Parliamentary Committee (to which I was elected in July). I told him any response should be carefully targeted to get those responsible (carpet bombing would be utterly counter-productive) and that it should be proportionate. I also said I wanted to see "an audit trail" which led to Osama bin Laden and, by extension, the Taliban. He told me it was "important there was evidence before we proceeded" and that there were "clear links with bin Laden".

I also asked him about reports that the US had lifted nuclear sanctions against Pakistan for coming out in support of the Americans. I wanted to know what practical difference this would make. I expressed concern that Kashmir could be the flash point for a nuclear exchange as the newly nuclear states of Pakistan and India had been eyeballing each other for years over this issue. If the policy objective were to overthrow the Taliban and bring in some kind of UN administration in Afghanistan (as was the case, for example, in East Timor) then there could be implications for the entire region.

What is victory?

I was also concerned about the looming humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan with millions facing starvation. My colleague Chris Mullion wondered aloud what would constitute a victory? What if the Taliban were replaced by the Northern Alliance? I don't want to see feuding warlords take over.

The Taliban regime is odious. Girls and women are denied education and are not allowed to work. Minorities are forced to wear badges. There are public executions and mutilations. Women

who, for example, inadvertently expose their ankles in public are beaten up. Magazines are not allowed and neither is television. The Taliban leaders ordered the destruction of priceless historic artefacts. It is a woeful record. But there are those in Pakistan and elsewhere who regard the Taliban as the lesser of the evils on offer. When I was in Pakistan two years ago, I was told by some Government ministers they (the Taliban) brought order where previously there had been chaos.

Compulsory Identity Cards?

We discussed the possibility of compulsory ID cards and I also pressed Blair on the point made by the Guardian in its editorial on that Monday we met that the Cabinet had not met for 10 days. The PM told me the cabinet met regularly. As he told me this I saw Robin Cook - who was sitting directly opposite me - arch one of his eyebrows almost imperceptibly. We all know the PM doesn't run a traditional cabinet Government. So why pretend. We have a de facto presidential system - without any of the checks and balances.

On this point we all pressed the PM to recall Parliament and this will happen next Thursday with the Labour Party Conference finishing a day early.

What happened in America will have affect us all. When I visited BAe Systems at Warton last week I heard about the likely cut back by airlines on Airbus orders. We have seen thousands of airline workers in the US and here in the UK being laid off. In the papers today, we read reports that the share price of the aero engine company, Rolls Royce, (so important to us in Pendle) have nose dived this month from 215p to 124p. The world economy is slowing down.

Liberal Democrats at the seaside

All this has overshadowed everything else. This week we have had the Lib Dem conference. Has anyone noticed? Charles Kennedy made a pretty lame speech but for me the most notable pronouncement was that the Lib Dems were abandoning the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee set up by the Prime Minister and Paddy Ashdown with a great fanfare in 1998. I no longer believe that Liberal Democrats will be invited into a Labour cabinet, as once seemed possible. The caravan has moved on.

In the new Parliament I have much to keep me busy. Besides

being on the Parliamentary Committee, I am on the Public Administration Select Committee whose brief ranges over the entire range of Government. We shall be looking at machinery of Government issues and also at service delivery - the public/private issue.

Change in the NHS

On this point, it seems to me remarkable that we have got ourselves into this huge organisational change in the NHS just when we should be concentrating on service delivery. We shall have a new mental health trust in Lancashire; new Primary Care Trusts; the possible merger of Burnley Health Care and Blackburn Trusts; the sweeping away of the East Lancashire Health Authority and big changes to the way in which patients and the public can bring influence to bear on the NHS.

All this organisational activity can easily mask the real objective which must be to tackle the huge health inequalities which disfigure the UK. Life expectancy here in Pendle for both men and women is way below some other areas of the country.

Labour needs to make a difference

More than ever, the Government needs the advice and support of its friends. Over the next couple of years we have got to make a measurable difference in key areas. Health, obviously, and education too. But we need to tackle run-down housing and do something about transport. If the Government balks at bringing Railtrack back into public ownership it could, surely, take a big equity stake and put public interest directors on the Railtrack board. Why not?

This is where the Party has a crucially important role to play. I was heartened to read that the CLP will be organising policy workshops under the guiding hand of Tony Pickles! I shall do everything I can to make them a success. In my view, the Party's policy making process nationally needs an overhaul. I agree with Hazel Blears when she says in the latest issue of Progress that: "Members need to feel confident their discussions are fully taken into account by policy commissions and the National Policy Forum". Quite so.

New Tory Leader - another Hague without the humour

Elsewhere, The Tories have a new Leader. Ian Duncan Smith (or IDS!) is a gift to us. His appointments to the front bench have been

Report to GC Friday 29 September 2001- page 4

weird and wonderful and sometimes exotic. Bill Cash at the despatch box - as Shadow Attorney General forced to talk about something other than Europe!

Parliament will soon be back and we shall be able to test the mettle of the new Tory team.

Some familiar issues are still there. Asylum and immigration off the front page for the moment but soon, perhaps, back with a vengeance. Foot and mouth still hasn't been eradicated. The Euro notes and coins will start circulating in most countries of the European Union as from January next year so holidays abroad will make us more familiar with it. We have yet seriously to engage people here in the UK about the pros and cons of joining.

The pot continues to boil furiously in Northern Ireland.

There are many challenges ahead.

Gordon Prentice MP

28 September 2001

G.C. REPORT 31.8.01

I am writing this in Liverpool today (Friday) and will not be at the GC this evening. My apologies. I am here for a wedding and the rain is, tragically, bucketing down. I am praying the weather will lift.

LETTER FROM AFRICA

Last week I returned from 10 days in Southern Africa where, conversely, drought is the big problem. In Botswana and Namibia huge tracts of country are desert. You can fly for a couple of hours and see the same unchanging arid earth below. In both cases, the desert amounts to areas the size of France and I am sure that water, or the absence of it, is likely to become the source of regional instability in the future, as water is diverted from rivers in the north, close to Angola, to supply the fast growing towns in the south.

I travelled with a small group of other MPs and had an opportunity to meet all the leading politicians over there - from the President down. The two countries have very different histories. Botswana was a British Protectorate and during the long struggle against Apartheid in South Africa - immediately to the south - the country became one of the so-called front line states, giving shelter to many of those who are now in the new Government in South Africa. Namibia was originally a German colony until it became independent (from South Africa) in 1990 and many of the Ministers and movers and shakers we met were SWAPO Freedom Fighters living only a decade ago, in the bush. They are still struggling to build a peaceful multi-racial Namibia on the back of its Apartheid past. There are still issues of equity to be addressed. Sixty percent of the most productive land is owned by 4,000 white commercial farmers and while there are no dangers of a "land grab" as is happening now in Zimbabwe, land reform is, for many, unfinished business.

The outlook for both countries is very uncertain because of the HIV-AIDS pandemic. Over one third of all sexually active adults are infected with the virus and the new drugs (the very expensive anti retro virals) which can control the disease, are simply not available.

I visited one shanty town outside Windhoek (capital of Namibia) where the cemetery was full up before the local authority had finished building it. I spoke to women in a co-operative in the town where they were turning old newspaper into papier mache coffins for children - I found it very distressing. The developed world has a huge amount to do to help these countries stricken by AIDS.

Outside the towns in the Kalahari Desert, dwell the San People, better known to us as the Bushmen. A huge controversy is raging as to whether these hunter gatherers, who move around in loin cloths and who have no contact with the outside world, should be permanently settled in villages or left alone to their nomadic way of live. The Botswana Government is adamant they should be settled this has drawn fierce criticism from organisations such as Survival International, who say it is a crime to forcibly change a way of life that has existed since the dawn of time. I tend to agree.

Both countries are havens for wildlife and I saw huge herds of elephants and hippos. The elephant population in Botswana has trebled over the last 15 years and is now approaching 150,000. The Government says it needs to cull but CITES (the Convention on trade in endangered species) will not allow this and bans the trade in ivory. To compound the problem, elephants - because they are very intelligent creatures - are moving south into Botswana from Angola where a civil war rages.

NEARER TO HOME

Earlier this week I attended a meeting with the Education Director at County Hall to discuss problems arising from the allocation of school places. Next week I will be meeting Martin Burgess, Head at Edge End High School, to discuss a number of issues, particularly the situation following the recent problems in Oldham, Bradford and Burnley.

GORDON PRENTICE MP

31.8.01

Cyn Good House

*Trin at
Barnley.*

*6 o'clock news & Royals
- Newsight
watch this weekend.*

*PFI reports
25 June by
Inst of Public Policy
Research.
1 PPR.*

REPORT TO G.C. 6 JULY 2001

Barnley

It has only been four weeks since the General Election, but already it feels like four years! This Parliament is certainly very different from its predecessor and when the Prime Minister spoke to the first meeting of the PLP after the election there was a strange, subdued atmosphere. It was certainly not celebratory. I think there is a feeling within the PLP that an agenda is being presented and we are not party to it. More about this later.

OLDHAM AND BURNLEY

The dominating events since 7 June have been the disturbances in Burnley and the possibility that these may spread into our own area and others like it. I had a meeting early on with Azhar and the Chief Executive of the council and on Wednesday of this week I met the Home Officer Ministers responsible for addressing the issues, John Denham and Angela Eagle, together with colleagues from Bradford, Oldham, Leeds and other towns in the front line. We all have our own ideas about what sparked things off, but there are common factors we cannot ignore. High levels of deprivation and poor housing and inadequate local amenities were part of the mix common to each disturbance.

On Tuesday of this week I tackled the housing issue with the newly appointed Minister, Sally Keeble. I told her that the amount of money allocated to East Lancashire was inadequate and did not begin to address the scale of the problem. The Government is now looking seriously at these issues and I believe that John Prescott is to visit Burnley shortly.

Here in Pendle 6% of our housing stock is empty and across East Lancashire one in five houses is unfit. Here in Pendle it is estimated that a colossal £150 m is needed to bring our housing stock up to scratch and while it would be unrealistic to expect change over night we have got to make a brisk and energetic start. That means looking carefully at the planning procedures for, say, clearance areas to ensure that when decisions are made they can be followed through rapidly. We also need to do something about disaffected young people - white and Asian. Here in Pendle, unemployment amongst Asians is 23% and amongst young Asians it is over 16% - way above the level for other groups.

I have spoken over the years about the £ millions coming into the area but much of this money has (for good reasons) gone into "capacity building" measures. So we have new offices and a focus on developing skills in order to increase employability, but of course this doesn't translate into visible signs of change on the ground. The Sure Start Programme is another example of this, where £1.6m is going into Whitefield and Bradley to help the under 5s. But for most people, this initiative will pass them by. We need to have parallel measures where physical change is apparent. The town centre work in Nelson is an example of this.

*Ken: - White Paper
new surgical units
/over...*

*fouring books
take over*

White paper.

** private finance -
new surgical units
with private sector inst.?*

Money Portuguese print of

Harry Whitty
Shish House Hotel

FOOT & MOUTH

The other dominating event of recent months has been Foot & Mouth which finally struck here in Pendle on 9 - 11 June. Until then the A59 had been a firebreak, separating us from the epidemic raging in the Settle/Clitheroe rectangle. So far, we have had three infected farms culled out, along with sixteen farms contiguous to them and five other farms contiguous to infected premises beyond the Pendle boundary. In addition we have had two separate dangerous contact farms which have also been culled out.

Last Friday I went to a meeting of farmers in Barnoldswick called by the Foot & Mouth Action Group which includes people from all political persuasions. The farmers present were all fired-up and I did my best to explain the Government's position without unnecessarily inflaming passions further. The meeting wanted an immediate end to contiguous culling and the immediate introduction of a vaccination policy. Everyone has been horrified by the pictures of the cull and there have been some chilling tales of culls which have gone wrong and I am following these up. However, the culling policy is, I believe, the right one and we need to do everything we can to stamp out this epidemic by the end of the summer.

A vaccinated animal can still be a carrier of the virus and if we vaccinate and do not then slaughter, we would accept that foot and mouth has become endemic in the UK. If we lose the disease free status this has major implications and not just for farmers.

SECOND TERM BLUES

I spoke earlier about the faltering start of this new Parliament. And I think there are clear lessons that have to be learned quickly if we are to make a success of this second term. In the first term we were told the priority was to secure a second term. In the second term, we simply cannot accept that the objective is a third term. We certainly have to deliver on the promises we made in all the key public services but we've got to take people with us - and that means Labour Party members too! The revelations in the newspaper this week about the role of the private sector in education are revealing because we have all been kept in the dark about the plans. A White Paper is to be published next week and I wait with interest to see what it has to say. The Government has also decided to press ahead with its plans for the London Underground in the face of opposition not just from the Mayor of London (which might be expected) but also from the entire London Group of Labour MPs. We have had announcements on Incapacity Benefit which have taken us by surprise. I think we need to move away from "command and control" towards a more (dare I say it) inclusive form of politics, where we discuss things first before making announcements.

private
sector

Tube

incapacity
benefit

Elsewhere in the political firmament strange things are happening. Peter Lilley is calling for the legalisation of cannabis and, apparently, the Duke of Edinburgh has kicked into touch my suggestion for a register of royal business interests. The report is apparently due to be published on Monday, although it was leaked in the Guardian today. Yesterday MPs also voted on their pay and conditions. I wish we could give it to someone else to decide but, inevitably, the buck stops with the Commons. I voted for the SSRB recommendations.

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GORDON PRENTICE MP
6 June 2001

July

last time I voted against
didn't take pay rise!

- 66 voted against
- but will take
benefits.

- pension - average 9 yrs
less than 10% collect
full pension.
- recommendation of
pension fund trustees.

The General Election in Pendle June 2001

The most significant feature of the General Election nationwide was the huge drop in turnout. People stayed away in droves. Most pundits explain this by saying (a) the polls all predicted a Labour landslide making the result a foregone conclusion and (b) the electorate felt Labour should be “waved through” to a second term “to finish the job”.

Turnout was down sharply in Pendle, and in all the other East Lancashire constituencies. In Pendle, it was down 11.4%; in Burnley 11.3%; in Hyndburn 14.5%; in Rossendale 14.2%; and in Blackburn 9.4% where there were seven parties in contention. Turnout in Pendle from 1992 - 2001 was down an astonishing 20%.

In terms of actual votes cast, the table below shows that over the past three General Elections, the Conservative vote has declined. The Lib Dem vote in 2001 stuck at its 1997 level. However, this time Pendle was not a target seat for the Tories (it was number 188 in terms of winnability) nor for the Lib Dems. This was fortunate. In seats which were targeted by the Lib Dems there were significant swings to them.

The result on 7 June means that Pendle will now be targeted by the Conservatives as a new marginal.

	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001
Lab	16604	18370	23497	25059	17729
Con	22739	21009	21384	14235	13454
Lib Dem	12056	12662	7976	5460	5479
anti federalist referendum			263	2281	
BNP					1976
UKIP					1094
Turnout			83.08	74.87	63.59

In Pendle, the swing from Labour to the Conservatives was 6.1%. This compares with Burnley 4.6%; Rossendale and Darwen 4.3%; Blackburn 3.7% and Hyndburn 1.1%.

How do we explain this? Although there are nationwide trends that can't be bucked, significant variations can usually be explained by local factors.

Foot and Mouth. In Pendle, foot and mouth struck in Barrowford in the middle of the election campaign. The Craven Herald which sells 3,300 copies in West Craven took small ads off the front page for only the second time in its 150 year history and replaced them with the story "Death in the Dales". In Labour constituencies hit by F&M such as Carlisle and Copeland there were big swings (6%-7.5%) away from Labour.

The Asian electorate. We have to reach out to the Asian voters. In parts of Nelson there were many windows sporting both the Conservative and Lib Dems posters. The 2015 votes that went to the Lib Dem Jamil Munir may well have gone to Rasjid Skinner. What were the factors that alienated some Asian voters from Labour? Was it the controversy over the Nelson West Renewal Area; whether properties should be renovated or pulled down?

Safeguarding the countryside. The "Keep off our Grass" campaign featured in the local press for many months in the run up to the election. What impact, if any, did this have?

The BNP. The BNP got a staggering 5% of the vote in Pendle - without any campaign whatsoever. Next door in Burnley, where they were active, they took 11.3%. Where did the BNP's votes come from? What lessons do we draw?

The UK Independence Party. UKIP chalked up 1,094 votes (2.8%) and it is a fair bet that most of these would otherwise have gone to the Conservatives.

The stay at homes. Many of those who chose not to vote this time are likely to be Labour voters. Who are they and where do they live? What do we do to get the turn-out up on, say, some council estates? What about "house meetings" in council estates?

What are the other local issues that may have had a bearing on the result?

How effective was our campaign literature? How did it measure up against the material put out by our opponents? Could we have done more to increase the participation of Pendle Labour Party members in the campaign? What do we need to do in the coming months to shore up and consolidate the Labour vote? What about an Annual Report from me to every elector in Pendle? Other ideas?

Report to GC 23 March 2001

We are now working on the assumption that the General Election will be held on 3 May although there is a (remote) possibility it may be held in April. We have a huge 15% lead over the Conservatives and the Prime Minister must be tempted to go for a short campaign to lessen the risks of "events" blowing us off course.

We are still waiting for the results of the Mandelson Inquiry (although the general public seems totally unconcerned with this issue) and we have witnessed the storm caused by the so-called "cash for wigs" affair. I think Lord Irvine was unwise to allow his name to be linked with fund-raising from a group of people he had the power to promote judicially but I believe there was no "corruption" in the sense we understand the term.

Budget on 7th March

People are more likely to be swayed in their voting intentions by how they perceive the economy to be doing. And things are, by and large, going well. The Budget is coming up on Wednesday 7 March and there are sure to be a few sweeteners. The Chancellor has a huge surplus and while he will not spray the cash around indiscriminately, there will be targeted help for certain groups.

The Conservatives are busily changing policies on all fronts. The Guardian calculated yesterday that the Tories have made no fewer than 11 changes in policy in the run up to the election. I am convinced the Conservative campaign will fall apart under the intense scrutiny of the election campaign.

Where they are not changing policies they are showing terrible misjudgement. A case in point today when the Tory Agriculture spokesman, Tim Yeo, put his foot in his mouth when he sought to blame the Government for the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. He was trying to make a party political point which was totally inappropriate. This is the same Tim Yeo who visited Pendle last week and told the press that Rasjid Skinner was an "outstanding candidate who would be a worthy successor to John Lee". It is as if I had never existed! He also claimed we had "too much regulation and red tape" and this from the Party who gave us BSE which cost the country over £4 billion.

Yeo also claimed that Labour had within its sights the sport of angling once it had dispatched hunting with dogs. This is a complete invention. The Hunting Bill - which gets its Report Stage in the Commons next Tuesday - seeks to ban hunting specified wild mammals with dogs. It does no more or less than what is on the face of the Bill.

"Keep off Our Grass"

On the home front the "Keep off Our Grass" campaign continues to feature in the local press with Tony Greaves talking in emotive terms about "our valley slowly dying". This is complete cobblers! There is enormous structural change taking place within the economy and East Lancashire is not immune from this. But to suggest that we are at death's door is ludicrous. He talks of "taking control of our own destiny" and "stop sheltering under Lancashire Structure Plans, regional planning guidance and Government planning policies and projections". What exactly is he suggesting - an independent state of Pendle!

The plain fact is that we fit into a wider regional economy in East Lancashire and we have to acknowledge what is happening around us. The County Council (along with Blackpool and Blackburn with Darwen) has just produced documents signalling the start of the Structure Plan review with the aim of adopting the new Plan by the end of next year.

At Westminster next week, David Blunkett will be speaking to us about the Schools Green Paper. This has generated a huge amount of controversy and a feeling that no-one was consulted about it. The consultation period runs until the end of June.

Around and About

We are waiting for more news of the Stagecoach sale. This could be a big issue locally.

Earlier this week I visited Rolls Royce with Peter Pike. The company had earlier received £250m from the Government to help develop the Trent series of engines.

Gordon Prentice MP

Friday 23 ~~February~~ 2001

March